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Blessing of the Spirits

2

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



"I WILL
NOW LEAD
YOU
INSIDE.
PLEASE,
FOLLOW
ME."

The beautiful girl gave a gentle but friendly smile. She looked to be around Rio's age, if not a bit younger; young enough to be a store attendant in training. But there was something oddly mature about the way she held herself.





Latifa teared
up and buried
her face into
Rio's chest.

Her small frame fit
snugly against him, and
her white, porcelain-like
skin seemed so delicate;
fragile enough to break
with a single touch...



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Prologue: Endo Suzune

One rainy day, when the skies were pouring down from above...

“Weh... *hic*... *sniffle*...”

It was a little before the afternoon turned to evening— at the time, I was still in the third grade of elementary school... and I was crying on the bus after school.

The school was far from my house, which was why I normally took the train to school. But on days with heavy rain like this, I often ended up taking the bus instead.

Today was a little different from all those other days, though.

After exerting all of my energy at the athletic meet, the movements of the bus lulled me to sleep. When I woke up, I found myself staring at unfamiliar scenery outside. As an elementary school student, I wasn’t given any extra pocket money to use—only the bare minimum needed.

I immediately fell into a panic, and naturally burst into tears.

That was when an older boy, around university-age, noticed my demeanor and called out to me with a gentle voice.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hweh...?”

My body twitched with a start, and I looked up at him. He seemed like a really cool, like... an older brother. He smiled softly, as though he was reassuring me.



“Did you get on the wrong bus?”

“Huh? Ah, no... I missed my stop...”

“Oh, I see. Where were you meant to get off?”

I sounded a little surprised when I responded, but the boy took it in stride as he continued to ask me questions.

“T-The park at the third district...”

“Got it. Then let’s get off at the next stop. I’ll take you to the stop closest to your house.”

“...O-Okay.”

While I had been taught at home and at school not to follow strangers, I didn’t hesitate to trust this person completely. I was overly excited at how he was just like a hero in those popular shoujo manga, appearing out of nowhere to save me, the main character. But...

“Ah, I don’t have... any money...”

I immediately remembered the fact that I didn’t have any money on me.

“It’s all right,” the boy said, smiling and gently shaking his head. Once we arrived at the next bus stop, he paid for my share of the bus fare and we both got off. Then, he headed towards the opposite bus stop and stared at the timetable. I was very nervous, so I silently watched his back.

“The next bus will be here soon, so let’s wait together.”

“O-Okay!”

Looking back on it now, I should have thanked him for paying for me. But I was so nervous at the time that I rudely forgot to. In the end, I remained silent and stared at the floor as my heart thumped in my chest—

“You shouldn’t really follow strange adults anywhere, but this is an emergency. Forgive me,” the older boy suddenly said with a strained smile. He probably mistook my continued silence for suspicion towards him.

“N-No! That’s... That’s not it!”

I tried to deny it in a hurry, but my fluster seemed to cement it instead. After that, the older boy kept talking to me so that I wouldn't feel awkward. It was considerate of him... But I was so embarrassed, my answers were all over the place.

Just like that, time flew by and we arrived at the bus stop closest to my house.

"Will you be okay from here?"

"Huh? Ah..."

It was like a spell had been lifted, dropping me back into reality.

This is... goodbye?

No. *I still haven't said thank you*—people often told me I had a meek personality, but I never felt it more strongly than in this moment. That was why...

"I-I! I have to thank you! For the bus fare!" I blurted out without realizing.

"It's fine— don't worry about it. Bye now." He shook his head as though declaring that his job was done here.

"Ah... no..."

Watching the older boy's retreating back, I squeezed out those words with a voice on the verge of tears. I had so many things I wanted to tell him, yet I hadn't said a single word of them to him.

"Ah... Umm. I guess I'll accept your gratitude?" He said in a slight panic at seeing me about to burst into tears.

"T-Thank you very m-much...!" I tried to respond in a hurry and stumbled over my words from nervousness.

Then, the older boy giggled... I was really embarrassed.

"T-Thank you very much..." I repeated once more, blushing furiously. I didn't stumble this time.

"You're welcome."

"Y-Yes. It's... this way." I said, leading the older boy to my house. It was a one minute walk from the bus stop. Once we arrived, I rang the familiar doorbell.

Mom came outside immediately.

“Welcome home, Suzune... What’s wrong?” Mom looked between me and the boy in confusion.

“Mom! We... we have to thank him! This boy saved me, and...!”
Overwhelmed, I let out a jumble of words that confused Mom even more.

“Actually...”

The boy filled out my explanation by explaining the situation to Mom.

“Oh my, we must have caused you a lot of trouble then. Thank you so much.” Mom bowed her head deeply and thanked him. “No, I’m just glad I was able to safely bring her here. I shall take my leave, then...” The older boy tried to politely excuse himself.

“Oh, would you like to stay for tea?” Mom called out to him. *Nice one, Mom!* — I rejoiced quietly in my head. “I’m sorry, but I have a shift at work now. I appreciate the thought, though. Thank you.”

He had something to do after this and needed to leave immediately. Mom went back inside for a moment to grab some money for the bus fare, then tried to offer him a little more. The older boy tried to respectfully reject her, but Mom forcefully handed it to him in the end. He thanked us rather apologetically and left.

“What a nice man.” Mom said, watching him walk away.

“Yeah...”

That wasn’t all. He was really cool, too.

“And he was really cool, too, wasn’t he Suzune?” Mom said, as though she had read my mind.

“Yeah... huh?” Strung along, I nodded without thinking. I looked up at Mom in a panic to see her grinning back at me. Of course, I flushed again at that.

“Fufufu, you’ll have to tell me about what happened in detail.” There was nothing I could hide from Mom, so I started to tell her about what happened on the bus.

“Do you want to take the bus from now on?” Mom said after I hastily finished my story.

“Huh? C-Can I really?”

“Sure. Amakawa Haruto, was it? It’d be nice if you could get closer to that young man,” Mom said, chuckling to herself at how my voice rose an octave higher when I’d replied.

One year later, on a certain summer day...

I was attending a swimming class held at the school pool during summer vacation. The class ended at noon, and I hurried to the bus stop afterwards.

Yay! He’s here today too! I got on the bus home and spotted the older boy sitting inside, making me cheer inside my head. My happiness nearly made me break out into a huge grin, which I desperately tried to hold back.

The older boy’s name was Amakawa Haruto. The very cool university student who saved me a year ago, when I was at a loss for what to do on the bus home. He often took the bus at this time of day.

Just between you and me.... The reason why I decided to start taking swimming classes when I wasn’t any good at sports was because the swimming class ended at a time where I could see the older boy more often.

Well, Mom figured it out right away.

But that aside, maybe it was because of summer vacation... but the bus was a lot emptier than normal that day. Haruto was sitting in his usual spot— fourth row from the back, next to the left window— and I sat in my usual spot, which was next to the window in the last row. Unfortunately, I hadn’t spoken to him once since the day he saved me. The most I had been able to do was watch his profile from diagonally behind him. I knew it was kind of stalkerish of me, but thanks to that, I learned a lot of things.

For example: he liked to gaze out the window a lot, he would often sigh these small sighs, and he always had a sad look on his face.

Was he worried about something? I was so curious about his story that I was drawn to him without even realizing it myself. That day, as I continued to stare

at him... he noticed my gaze again. Once in a while— or rather, quite often as of late— he would notice me staring at him. I sensed he was about to turn back to look at me, so I ducked my head in a hurry and looked away.

Then, as I slowly raised my head again to peek at him, I made eye contact with the high school-aged girl sitting two rows behind Haruto. She was a really pretty girl who seemed really mature. She quickly turned to face the front, but she was smiling quietly to herself, as though she had seen something funny. But it wasn't in a malicious way... She had a gentle kind of air about her.

Actually, this older girl often rode the bus at this time, too. And— I might be wrong, but— it felt like she would stare at Haruto a lot too. *Could this older girl like him too? If so, I can't lose to her*— I thought to myself in determination.

At that moment, the bus gave a sudden, lurching jerk. I felt like I was floating for a moment, before intense pain immediately traveled throughout my whole body. My vision abruptly darkened, and I couldn't see anything in front of me.

Then... *Wha...?*

Without realizing what exactly had happened, I lost consciousness.

Chapter 1: Journey to the Neighboring Country

The morning after his farewell with Celia at the Royal Academy, Rio was walking around the market outside the city walls to gather equipment for his journey.

He needed food, water, cooking utensils, clothes, bedding, medicine, weapons... humans clearly required a vast amount of resources to live. But since there was a limit to how much he could carry when traveling alone, Rio had to carefully screen his necessities and purchase only the barest minimum. He would take only those items with him on his journey.

Right now, he only had his casual clothes that were typical of a noble, and a single sword. It was much too lightweight a weapon for him to be comfortable traveling with.

That being said, ever since Rio had enrolled into the Academy, he had spent his entire life inside the city walls. While Celia had taken him to the markets within the city walls to go shopping before, this was his first time venturing into the markets that were outside the city.

He was at a bit of a loss, now.

I have no idea which store to go to...

He had gone around several stores already, but there were just so many of them. A few among them had sold such crudely-made products, making him furrow his brow on many occasions. Because he wanted to buy quality items that would last him a while, he didn't want to randomly pick a store to buy from. After wandering through the crowds pondering this and that, he grew tired, and stepped into a back alley to take a quick break.

That was when a delicious aroma wafted to him, immediately piquing his appetite. It was coming from a street stall in the alley.

There weren't many customers at the moment— possibly because it was that quiet period of time between breakfast and lunch, or maybe due to its

unfavorable location— but the smell that was wafting from it truly smelled delicious.

Come to think of it, I haven't had breakfast yet. I'll buy something from that stall and ask them for shop recommendations.

Spurred into movement by his hunger, Rio's feet carried him towards the stall. A little girl was behind the stall counter, looking somewhat bored by the lack of customers. Behind her, a woman that seemed to be her mother was busy toiling away at cooking.

"Ah, welcome!"

As Rio approached the stall, the little girl beamed from ear to ear and greeted him. She must have been around seven or eight years old. She was a cute child, if a bit thin.

However, the instant she saw Rio's noble clothes, her expression stiffened. She had surely mistaken him as a child of nobility.

In the Kingdom of Beltrum, where society was based on social status, it was quite common for nobles to act violently towards commoners. That was why commoners feared the nobility. This little girl had probably learned that sentiment from her mother.

"Ah, erm, I mean..." Realizing she couldn't act rudely, the little girl forced an uncomfortable smile on her face.

"You don't need to be so nervous. It smells really good here... Are you selling something?" Rio spoke to her gently in an attempt to reassure her.

"Umm, it's bread with sauce and vegetables and fried meat inside, sir." The girl did her best to speak politely to Rio.

"I see. Then, I think I'll take some." Rio smiled softly, eagerly expressing his desire to purchase their product.

"Oh my, is it a noble? ...Huh? Ah, umm..." The mother noticed Rio's presence and hurried to greet him, but her eyes widened dramatically when she saw Rio's face.

"Is something the matter?" Rio asked her curiously.

“Ah, no... It’s nothing. P-Please excuse my actions.” The woman fearfully apologized for her strange behavior, but she continued to watch Rio with observant eyes.

“Oh, is it about my hair color?” Rio guessed at the reason as to why the woman reacted with shock, touching a hand to his hair. Black hair was rare in Beltrum; he had been ridiculed numerous times by students at the academy because of this hair.

“Umm, that’s... Yes. I actually knew someone a long time ago, a boy with black hair. So I thought that maybe... But there was no way that child was nobility, so it was just my mistake. I-I don’t know how I can apologize enough to you for this...”

“...May I ask what the name of that boy was?” Rio questioned the trembling woman. She kept her head down out of fear. Perhaps she was someone he knew back from when he lived in the slums.

“I-I believe it was Rio...”

Bingo—apparently, Rio had met this beautiful woman before.

Unfortunately, Rio was on the run right now, and couldn’t afford to confirm her suspicions so easily. If she had mistaken him for a noble’s son, then it was to his advantage.

“I’m sorry, I have no recollection of that name.”

“Is that... so...”

Rio decided to feign ignorance, and the woman showed her clear disappointment.

“Have you been looking for that boy?” Rio asked. He couldn’t remember any situation where he had met this woman before.

If he had to take a guess, he would assume it was through the gang of thugs that he had lived with in the slums. If that was the case, then the number of possibilities were narrowed down significantly. If it was someone who knew him well enough to remember his name, then it was most likely one of the people who frequented the small shack Rio lived in back then. Most of the

women who frequented the shack were prostitutes that the thugs called over. The ones they favored the most had been Gigi, who had been killed in the shack, and her little sister Angela. There were several others they had liked as well, and Rio guessed this woman had to be one of them.

That being said, it had been over five years since he last saw them. The woman in front of him was not wearing any makeup, so she didn't have the air of a prostitute at all, making it hard for him to place her.

"It's just that he may have witnessed the final moments of my older sister." The woman's expression clouded over as she spoke. The little girl looked on in confusion at their conversation.

An older sister... Could it be Gigi's little sister, Angela?

Thanks to her words, Rio was finally able to place the woman in front of him. He fixed his expression so that his surprise wouldn't show, then swallowed a breath at their coincidental reunion. She used to wear thick makeup in the past, but he could see traces of her old self now that he knew who she was.

Come to think of it, Gigi had mentioned how she wanted to start a store with Angela one day... But he didn't want to drag the conversation out any further, so he changed the subject.

"...I'm sorry, I asked something very intrusive of you."

"N-No, it's because I acted rudely to begin with. It's my fault... Please accept my apologies!" Angela bowed her head reflexively at Rio's apology.

"I'm actually rather hungry right now. Could I take two?" Finding it unproductive to continue their back-and-forth, Rio cut to the chase.

"I-I'm not sure our products would suit the taste of a noble like you, sir..." Angela replied, ashamed. She was worried that Rio would change his mind the moment he took a bite of the food. It wasn't strange to meet nobles like that.

"That's all right. I'm used to stall foods like this," Rio explained with a strained smile. His words made Angela lower her guard just a little.

"Then... that'll be eight small coppers for two."

"In that case, you can take this. I don't need change," Rio said, offering one

small silver.

“I couldn’t possibly accept that...” Angela hurried to take out his change. For her, a single small silver was over half her usual daily earnings.

“It’s to apologize for scaring your child. Please take her to eat something delicious.” Rio shook his head, smiling at the little girl standing quietly.

“But...”

“How about, in exchange, you tell me of any good, trustworthy stores that stock equipment for traveling? I’m actually not too familiar with the shops in this area...” Rio bashfully scratched the back of his head in embarrassment. For a brief moment, Angela stared back at him in befuddlement— before she broke out into giggles.

“In that case...”

She proceeded to tell Rio about several stores she recommended. He stored the shop names and their specialties in his head as he watched Angela prepare the food.

Just as she finished her explanation, the food was done.

“Here you are.” Angela offered him the completed sandwich. The ingredients were enclosed in a crispy baguette, the well-cooked meat and special salty sauce blending together thickly to waft a savory aroma. It was enough to make Rio drool.

“Thanks,” he said as he accepted the first sandwich.

Picking it up in his hands, he took a hard bite— the commoners seemed to favor this kind of tough bread. The taste of the juicy meat and salty sauce spread throughout his mouth. He couldn’t help but turn his lips up into a smile.

“It’s delicious,” Rio said in great satisfaction, making Angela sigh a breath of relief.

Just like that, Rio polished up both sandwiches. The little girl working at the stall looked up at him, watching the way he ate with awe.

“Come again anytime, big bro!”

“C-Cut that out, Sophie!”

As he departed, the little girl— Sophie— called out to Rio with a big smile. Her attitude had completely flipped from earlier as her wariness of him softened, then wore off. Angela quickly tried to shush her, worried that she came across as overly familiar.

“Thank you. I’m going somewhere far away for a while, but I’ll come visit you again soon. Bye bye,” Rio said, smiling at Sophie. With a small bow at Angela, he walked away from the stall as Sophie waved him off enthusiastically. He left the back alley and returned to the main street to head for the shop that Angela had told him of.

...Hm?

After walking for a while, he noticed he was being watched by someone. Rio stopped in his tracks and glanced around him, but there were so many people around, he wasn’t able to identify the source of the gaze.

Was it just my imagination?

Despite feeling uneasy, Rio continued walking.



After that, Rio completed his shopping quickly. With the false accusation of what had happened in the forest currently placed on his head, he wanted to avoid staying around any longer than necessary. If possible, he wanted to leave Beltrum by midday.

He had just finished purchasing weapons, clothes, and a backpack to store his items in. He had sold the casual nobility clothes he had been wearing for his travel funds. They were high quality, and the price they sold for reflected that.

Rio had finished changing into his new clothes: a black robe that allowed him to appear like a rookie adventurer-for-hire with modest funds. All he had left was to purchase food supplies, when...

“Hey.”

Someone called out to Rio from behind. He turned back to see a man dressed like a hoodlum trying to peer beneath his hood with a glare. Rio looked back at

him skeptically. Perhaps this was the person he had sensed watching at him earlier...

“What?”

“Ain’t ya that Rio kid?”

“...No, I’m not. If you’ve got the wrong person, I’ve somewhere to be.” Rio had nearly faltered for a second before he tried to brush the topic away. But the man stepped in front of him boldly, blocking his way.

“Now... just hold yer horses. Just now there was a wanted poster on the bulletin board for some brat named Rio. Bein’ an information broker ’n all, I was aware of it sooner than anyone else.”

As he spoke, the man bent forward with his eyes peeled to unabashedly peer at Rio’s face. Rio wiped any trace of emotion from his face and stared back at the man.

“Hey. Cat got yer tongue? Why don’t ya say somethin’?”

“Excuse me. I felt your foolish prattle unworthy of my time. Exactly what does that have to do with me?” Rio asked, voice subdued from holding back his simmering rage. The man gave a wicked grin.

“Well, to put it bluntly, the description of the brat on the wanted poster matches yer features exactly. You were wearin’ noble clothes at first, so I couldn’t speak to ya so easily, but now yuh’ve changed into some hood that avoids drawin’ peoples attention. So, as an information broker, everythin’ clicked into place. That’s why I spoke up to ya.”

“You’ve got the wrong person.” Rio immediately shot down the man’s conjecture.

“Don’t try tuh pretend. Ain’t many black-haired brats around here. Yer Rio, ain’t ya?”

“I’m not,” Rio denied, then began to walk away. But the man rushed up to stop him.

“Hey, wait!”

“Let go.” Rio shot a cold glare at the man who grabbed his shoulder with

familiarity.

“S-Stubborn one, ain’t ya?”

“Because you’re wrong.”

“...Tch, cunnin’ brat y’ are. Well, whatever. But hey, you seem to be doin’ quite well for yerself. How much money you got on ya?”

It was just one question after another. The man continued to flap his tongue about endlessly, but Rio figured out his motive with those last words.

His aim was blackmail.

He should have just reported Rio right away, but he foolishly let his greed lead him astray.

Well, that makes it all the better for me, Rio thought coldly.

“I’ve had enough of this. I’m not opposed to using my right to strike on you, understood?” Rio said, reaching for the knife hidden at his waist threateningly.

Right to strike referred to a law where nobility had the power to cut down any commoner that affronted them, on the spot, without a trial. Of course, Rio was not a noble, but because he had been dressed as one until just before, he figured he could use the man’s misunderstanding to threaten him right back.

Just as he predicted, fear flashed in the man’s eyes.

“H-Heh, that’s a bluff. How about I kick up a fuss ’n yell for the soldiers right here ’n now? We may be outside the city walls, but the security here’s pretty decent. Not a lot of ’em, but they still patrol this area. Ain’t gonna matter to me if soldiers come, but you’d be in trouble, wouldn’t ya?” The man asked in a high-pitched voice, as though he was trying to convince himself.

“Not particularly. Would you like to try?” Rio replied indifferently.

“Y-You’re sure about that?”

“You don’t need to check with me before you yell. We’ll see who gets into trouble once you do,” Rio replied pleasantly, making the man bite his lip. In the face of such a big fish, the man felt conflicted.

“...If you’re done here, I’ll be going now.” With a frosty nod at the frustrated

expression on the man, Rio left, concealing himself within the crowds of people and heading towards the exit of the capital.

He didn't notice the small figure observing him from afar at all.



Three days had passed since Rio left the capital of Beltrant.

He continued his beeline towards the east, aiming for the faraway lands of the Yagumo region. By making full use of his essence to enhance his physical abilities and body, he had almost reached the country that neighbored Beltrum — the Kingdom of Galarc.

Still, his near-supernatural speed would have attracted unwanted attention if he used the roads, so he moved through the mountain forests instead. Because of that decision, his route was made needlessly tougher: there was a higher chance of encounters with monsters and other dangerous beasts, resulting in fatigue accumulating in his physical body. However, while Beltrum was wider horizontally, Galarc was wider vertically — this meant that it wouldn't take Rio as much time to cross the country horizontally.

East of the Kingdom of Galarc was the Wilderness — a wide area of land that existed outside of human control. There were no roads nor maps drawn of it, and the terrain itself was rugged, so Rio foresaw a drop in his movement speed when he reached that point. And while the Yagumo region was just beyond the Wilderness, it was said that following the trackless paths on foot could take years. The beasts and monsters that could be encountered in the area were far more ferocious than those found within the Strahl region, making the journey itself life-threatening.

Despite this, Rio chose to head towards Yagumo anyway — he wanted to see the ancestral hometown that his mother spoke of in his childhood, build graves for his parents, and organize the complicated feelings stowed away in his heart.

Setting all of that aside for now, though... At the moment, the time had just ticked into the afternoon hours. Rio would soon be crossing the border into the Kingdom of Galarc.

I should check the roads just once. There may be a city nearby where I can

make a pit stop.

Once Rio came to that decision, he approached a towering tree nearby and scaled its tall trunk in the blink of an eye. From the top, he looked around at his surroundings and calculated his position using the sun. He directed his gaze towards the direction he needed to go towards, and spotted puffs of smoke rising into the air in the distance. It was probably being produced by a human settlement; the amount of smoke heavily suggested that it was a city.

With his destination decided, Rio climbed down from the tree. Once he was safely on his feet, he took a guess at the location of the road towards the city and ran towards it. While he did come across a number of goblins and orcs along the way, he left them in the dust of his overwhelming speed. It would be a waste of time and energy to stop and fight each and every one of them, like some kind of righteous fool, so the most he did was intercept a pack of nimble wolves that surrounded him as he passed by, as a warning to them.

Rio skillfully evaded the dense overgrowth as he ran with light-footed steps. About ten minutes of running later, he spotted a road weaving through the forest. He slowed down, stepping firmly on the ground to kill his momentum and onto the road with a hop. The road was about ten meters wide, which was enough for a horse-drawn carriage to easily pass through. Once he confirmed that there was no one else nearby, he set off at a speed that wouldn't cause suspicion if he was spotted.

Roughly twenty to thirty minutes later, he arrived at his destination city.

The road into the city was occupied with visiting carriages and travelers on foot. Rio followed them from behind at a distance. The lands near the city were scattered with wheat fields, vegetable farms, vineyards, pastures, and cattle barns; Rio could spot farmers working here and there. Then, after following the road for a while, the walls surrounding the city came into view.

The city still appeared to be under development, as there seemed to be sections of the wall that were still being constructed. Rio could see several figures energetically working away.

I hope my wanted status hasn't reached Galarc yet... As he gazed upon the people going about their lives from afar, Rio considered his current issues.

At present, Beltrum and Galarc were allied. If the Kingdom of Beltrum sought action from Galarc, then Rio's wanted poster might have validity within this country, too.

And there was something else to keep in mind: in the Strahl region, there were ancient artifacts known as enchanted airships. They could fly through the air at an average speed of a little under 50 knots, so it was more than possible that notice of his situation had already reached Galarc.

I'll have to check the bulletin board near the city gate first. If everything seems okay, I'll go find some food. Then I have to send a letter to Professor Celia and let her know I'm safe... Rio counted off his tasks on his fingers.

He was actually rather low on food stock at the moment. The problem of the wanted poster at the capital caused him to flee the country early, prioritizing his escape over buying more food. That was why he absolutely had to restock on supplies for his journey here in the Kingdom of Galarc before he ventured into the Wilderness.

Rio readied himself and put on the hood of the robe he had purchased in Beltrum.

He walked to the gate that acted as the entrance to the city. Next to the gate was a bulletin board with various official notices posted on it. Among them were detailed wanted posters, and Rio cast his glance over them one by one.

My name... doesn't seem to be here.

Unable to find himself on the board, Rio let out a sigh of relief. His expression relaxed now that he knew he'd be able to pass through the gate into the city.

And with that, understandably, his hunger suddenly increased tenfold. Other than small water breaks, he hadn't consumed anything while on the run.

Next to the gate — right beside the bulletin board — were rows of various street stalls cramped together like a marketplace. There were cheap-looking bars and inns too. Because the gates were closed at night, setups like this could be found outside any large city's walls.

But right now, Rio was drawn towards the food stalls more than anything else. There were probably plenty of delicious restaurants inside the city walls,

but he wasn't interested in going out of his way to find them.

I can buy something at a stall while I gather what ever information I can.

Lured by the mouth-watering smells, Rio let his feet carry him forward. He came to a stop in front of a stall selling grilled beef skewers. There were no other customers at the moment, so he stepped forward.

"Sir? Please give me three skewers."

"Sounds good. That'll be six small coppers."

Rio put in his order with a friendly smile, to which the owner replied in a cheerful voice.

"Here's a large copper."

"Righto. Here's your four small coppers-worth of change... and here're the goods. Eat up."

After exchanging the currency, Rio took the food in his hands. The beef skewer was seasoned simply with just salt, but it was freshly grilled, and it let off a hunger-enticing scent. Perfect for filling a hungry stomach. The meat itself wasn't high quality, and it was rather tough to chew on, but Rio polished off the skewers in an instant.

"Hehe. You sure eat well, boy," the owner said happily as he rubbed his nose.

"That's because you cooked it well, sir. By the way, could you tell me a little bit about this country? I've actually come here from the countryside of a much smaller nation," Rio asked in a polite but friendly tone.

"Sure thing. You must be a rookie adventurer. Am I right, boy? Most rookie adventurers your age get jaded early on, but from what I can see, you don't appear too haughty, so you're doing well. If you wanna use this city as your base, I'll welcome you here."

"Thanks." Rio wasn't exactly an adventurer, but he didn't feel the need to correct the man either, so he let the comment slide.

"Right, so you wanted to know about this country. Well, there's the Proxia Empire to the north, who we squabble with by way of the smaller nations between us. We have an alliance with Beltrum, located to our west. Then

there's the Kingdom of Centostella to the south, who we aren't on bad terms with, either. This is a pretty comfortable place to live in, if you ask me. Especially in this city."

"It's a small city, but it seems lively and bustling with people." Rio voiced the thought he'd had earlier while he watched the workers.

"You got that right! And it's all thanks to—"

"— the way Lady Liselotte's governed this trade city, Amande! How about it, boy? Wanna try some 'pasta' soup? It's a kind of 'men' food that Lady Liselotte invented."

The skewer stall owner was building up the tension in his speech, when the owner of the stall next to him suddenly butted in. He had just seen off his last few customers.

"Aww, bro. I was just about to say that myself." The skewer stall owner sulked at having the spotlight stolen from him.

"Hehe. Don't say that, little bro. You were gonna recommend that boy over here, weren't you?"

Apparently, these two were brothers. The older brother apologized, making the little brother brighten up with a smile.

Liselotte... Wait, did he just say 'pasta' and 'men'?

As the two brothers chit-chatted, Rio's ears zeroed in on the vocabulary that had appeared in their conversation, because 'pasta' and 'men' were two words that Rio— no, Amakawa Haruto— was quite familiar with. 'Pasta' was a type of Italian cuisine, while 'men' was the Japanese word for noodles, which derived from the Chinese word 'mein.' Neither were foods that Rio had experienced eating in this world before.

There was no way the inhabitants of this world should have known those words.

"Pasta soup and... *men*, you say?" Rio asked hesitantly.

"Yep. Pasta's a type of food that's made from processed wheat. Lady Liselotte says it's a type of *men*. The only place you can eat it outside of the city walls is

at my bro's stall," the skewer stall owner explained proudly.

"Then... can I get one serving of that pasta soup, please?" In this case, seeing was believing — so Rio decided to go ahead and order it.

"That's the spirit! Normally, I'd charge eight small coppers... but since you just came from the countryside, I'll give you a discount. That'll be four small coppers, just for you, boy."

With the stall owner's discount, Rio handed him four small copper coins with thanks.

"Pleasure doing business. I'll cook it up right now, so just sit tight. While you're waiting, you can hear all about the wonderful Lady Liselotte from my bro."

"Then, if you're willing to oblige?" Interest piqued by the talk of this pasta-inventing Liselotte girl, Rio decided to go along with the man's suggestion. He turned to face the skewer stall owner.

"Righto, leave it to me. Lady Liselotte is the governess of the city of Amande. She's the daughter of Duke Cretia, and she graduated from the Royal Academy of Galarc when she was ten years old. Duke Cretia left her in charge of governing this town shortly after her graduation," the skewer stall owner explained evenly.

The trading city of Amande was a small city created by logging the trees in the forest. It was located on the westmost outreaches of Duke Cretia's territory in the west of Galarc. It was only half a year ago that Liselotte assumed the post of Governess of Amande; ever since she came into power, the town that had been nothing more than a pit stop for travelers had rapidly progressed in development. Now, Amande was on track to become a vital trading site that connected the west side of Beltrum and the east side of Galarc. The population was around 1,000, but the hustle and bustle of the city far surpassed that number.

Liselotte herself was still eleven years old, yet she had a number of different achievements under her belt. The skewer stall owner spoke of them all with pride.

First, she had caused an agricultural revolution in the farmlands of Duke Cretia's territory. Second, she continuously invented new foods and recipes. Third, she also put consideration into the ability of the cityfolk to have leisure and recreation-time. Fourth, she was also the leader of the largest trade organization in the city, the Ricca Guild. And there were more achievements in addition to those, still.

"And above all else—"

"— she's absolutely adorable!"

Just as an infatuated expression appeared on the skewer stall owner's face, the pasta stall owner interrupted from his side. The two brothers' words overlapped neatly.

"H-Huh..." Rio drew back a little at their creepy synchronization, but the skewer stall owner paid no mind to Rio's reaction as he continued.

"She doesn't act arrogant when dealing with commoners like us, either. Every now and then she'll come to inspect the market outside the city walls, and last time, she even smiled at me!" he said with a grin, but the pasta stall owner looked exasperated by his words.

"That was just you mistaking her line of sight. She was definitely smiling at *me* back then."

"What?! 'Fraid I can't let a comment like that slide so easily, brother!"

Liselotte was basically the idol of this city. Truth be told, being the daughter of nobility already put her far out of the reach of commoners. Having a cute appearance — and a kind personality on top of that — made it easy for misunderstandings to occur. Even so, this Liselotte was only eleven years old, and the brothers before Rio were easily in their thirties. He couldn't help but smile bitterly at that.

"I see you both have a lot of love for Lady Liselotte," Rio said in an attempt to placate them.

"F-Fool! We're not good enough to love her!"

"T-That's right! We may be happy to lay down our lives for Lady Liselotte, but

that's beside the point!" Their love for Liselotte ran so deep, Rio's face twitched in his attempt to keep smiling.

"Aaand... it's done! This is the renowned pasta soup of my stall. It's hot... Be careful so you don't burn yourself," the pasta stand owner said, holding out a wooden bowl, fork, and spoon.

"It looks delicious. So this is pasta soup... I see..." Rio accepted the bowl and peered carefully at its contents.

Inside was a type of pasta that Amakawa Haruto was undoubtedly familiar with — Italian noodles that were called *spaghetti*. The soup was clear, and most likely seasoned with nothing but salt. There were bacon and vegetables in the soup, too, adding a delicious fragrance to the steam wafting from it.

"Hehe, thanks. Oh, you're meant to eat *men* foods with a fork and spoon. Do you know how to use those, boy?" A fair proportion of commoners didn't have access to cutlery like forks and spoons, so the pasta stall owner asked, just in case.

"Yes, I do."

"That's great. Must've been raised well, huh? Most adventurers find them too bothersome and just slurp up the food by grabbing at it with their hands. They get burned a lot."

"Haha, I'll have to pass on slurping like that," Rio gave a strained laugh as he lowered himself into a seat next to the stall. He set the bowl down on the makeshift table before him and picked up the fork and spoon.

As he enjoyed the smell of the soup, he moved the fork and spoon with practiced hands and considered the texture first. From the tender, springy texture, the pasta used was probably fresh, not dried or preserved. The flavor was simple and salty; he could appreciate the taste of the vegetables and bacon, too. Still, Rio would have preferred a spicier taste with garlic, chilli peppers, and olive oil instead. But those things were probably hard to offer here, due to their costs.

If there are dried noodles out there, I could take them as preserved food on my journey, Rio thought to himself as the nostalgic taste of pasta relaxed his

expression. If there was fresh pasta being made, then dried noodles should be more than accessible, too.

“Sir, can you tell me where I can buy this pasta?” Rio hastily asked the owner about his stock.

“Oh? Have you fallen for pasta, too, boy? If you go to the Ricca Guild shop inside the city walls, they’ll sell you some. They sell other products exclusive to the Guild, so it’d be well worth a visit. It’s kinda pricey, but they also sell meat ‘manju’ at their shop.”

“Meat *manju*, you say?”

“Yeah. They’re round, and they kinda look like bread, but their texture is fluffy and surprisingly soft. And the best part is, they’re filled with juicy minced meat. It’s expensive, but worth trying once.”

The pasta stall owner’s explanation made something click in Rio’s head. The food he had described just now sounded very similar to ‘nikumanju’ — which were *meat buns* that Amakawa Haruto had eaten before.

“Huh, that sounds nice. I’ll try it out later.” Rio pasted a smile on his face as he expressed his interest, then he resumed his meal, silently, as he processed his thoughts about this mysterious Liselotte.

Meat buns... right.

Pasta, noodles, and meat buns — all of these foods existed on Earth, with the exact same names and ingredients. What were the chances that this world *and* Earth would, coincidentally, have words that sounded the same *and* have the same meaning?

He couldn’t go as far as to say it was absolutely impossible, but...

While one word might have been believable, having a second and third word in the same instance made the possibility much lower, especially because they were all foods invented by a single person. As a result, Rio’s suspicions seemed more and more conclusive.

Perhaps this Liselotte girl was in the same position as him, Rio suspected. In other words... perhaps someone who was living on Earth had died, only to be

reborn as Liselotte Cretia in this world. That person was most likely Japanese.

Of course, it was also possible that Liselotte was simply a facade. A third-party of Japanese origin may be acting as her brain instead — but there was no proof of that, either.

At any rate, Liselotte definitely had access to Earth knowledge — knowledge she was most likely using to revolutionize Amande, Rio deduced. But that was as far as his thoughts went before they came to a screeching halt. He had no intention of aggressively pursuing his curiosity any further than that. Even if Liselotte really was experiencing the same circumstance as him, he didn't have the slightest desire to meet her and discuss it.

Because the human named Amakawa Haruto had died full of regrets.

Meeting her wouldn't change anything, only remind him of his bitter memories and unwanted lingering attachments — that thought alone prevented Rio from acting.

Amakawa Haruto was dead.

Right now, Rio was Rio, not Amakawa Haruto. That was the undeniable truth.

Sure, Amakawa Haruto's memories and personality might have been residing within Rio's body, but they were blended in.

No... he wasn't even sure if they were real or not.

On top of that, even if he were to return to Earth like this, he wouldn't be able to live as Amakawa Haruto anymore. It would be impossible, because Amakawa Haruto had his burdens, while Rio had his...

At any rate, this Liselotte situation opened the possibility of others being placed in similar circumstances to himself. Rio considered himself fortunate enough to learn that much. And while he was postponing the matter for now, if he was lucky, it might not even end up being an issue at all.

In any case, there was no way they'd let someone of unknown origins meet a daughter of high-class nobility anyway. For now, just being able to smack his lips at the nostalgic taste of this cooking was enough.

"Thank you. The pasta soup was delicious. I'm going to go check out the Ricca

Guild now... I'll stock up on pasta and try out the meat manju," Rio said after polishing the last spoonful of soup from his bowl, then left the stalls behind.

"Later, boy," both owners said warmly to see him off.

Rio headed straight for the city gates, where he entered the city itself and made his way towards the Ricca Guild to buy pasta.



The main road of Amande, lined with shops and inns, stretched from the east to the west of the city. At its center, in a square that could only be described as the city's prime location, was the main branch of the Ricca Guild.

So this is the Ricca Guild headquarters...

Rio looked up at the stylish building made of wood and brick. Towering over the surrounding buildings at five stories tall, its high class aura was almost awe-inspiring. At the front of the Ricca Guild was a small counter, where the rumored meat buns were being sold. They were moderately pricey at two large coppers each, but a line had formed regardless.

Rio joined the line, deciding to purchase them before he went inside. He handed over the coins and took the meat bun from the shop attendant; it was fairly large, and its steaming hot texture was soft and tender. It looked quite similar in appearance to a Chinese steamed bun. Rio moved himself to a corner of the square and eagerly prepared himself to taste the meat bun. He chomped down into it and felt the scalding hot soup squirt onto his tongue, nearly burning his mouth. As for the taste...

It's good, but...

He was taken aback. The taste was nothing like what Rio expected from something that looked like a Chinese steamed bun. If he had to guess, he'd say that the meat inside was flavored with salt, pepper, and a lot of onion. Rio guessed that the ginger, oyster sauce and sesame oil needed to make that signature meat bun flavor probably wasn't available here.

For the record, while it was impossible to find foods with the exact pronunciation as Earth words like the Japanese *men* and *manju*, the produce and livestock eaten on Earth existed in this world, too. For example, wheat and

other condiments like salt were available here.

However, there were some ingredients that couldn't be obtained in Strahl for climate reasons, so recreating the same recipes and flavors from Earth was difficult. Once Rio made it through the Wilderness and arrived at the Yagumo region, he'd probably be able to get his hands on some new ingredients that were unavailable in Strahl. If he did, he might be able to use Amakawa Haruto's knowledge to recreate some Earth dishes.

As Rio's imagination ran wild in his head, he finished eating the meat bun. "Thank you for the meal," he murmured in Japanese, the taste of the pasta and the meat bun making him feel a bit nostalgic.

Now that he was finished with his meal, he directed his gaze at a corner of the square, where the Ricca Guild building impressively stood. The entrance to the building was wide open, welcoming anyone inside, like a peddler who had just walked in. Rio decided to head inside too.

Immediately after stepping through the doors, he was met with several female store attendants waiting to serve the customers. There was also a security guard on standby, positioned where most customers wouldn't notice his presence.

"Welcome to the Ricca Guild."

Upon noticing Rio's arrival, the store attendants all gave a polite bow as they greeted him. Their clearly practiced movements caught Rio by surprise. Then, a young girl with beautiful, wavy hair stepped towards Rio.

"Sir, we apologize for the inconvenience, but weapons are forbidden in the store. If you have any on you, we will gladly hold onto them for you until you leave." The beautiful girl gave a gentle but friendly smile.

She looked to be around Rio's age, if not a bit younger; young enough to be a store attendant in training. But there was something oddly mature about the way the girl held herself. She was wearing the same uniform apron dress as the other attendants, yet she was overflowing with the elegance that would rival a noble daughter.

"...I understand."

Taken aback at first, Rio then readily agreed and began to remove his weapons: the sword at his waist, two hidden daggers, and several throwing knives. A second attendant came to take Rio's weapons away.

She asked Rio his name for administrative purposes, to which he confidently responded: "It's Haruto."

Rio was still wearing his robe with the hood up over his head; while he knew it wasn't a good look to have his face hidden, it was a typical look for adventurers, and the shop didn't seem to have any complaints, as long as he removed his weapons.

"Would you mind if we performed a body check?"

"No, go right ahead." Rio lifted his arms with a nod.

"Excuse me," the female attendant said as she gently began to check Rio's body. The investigation was over in seconds, and the girl deemed Rio completely disarmed with a nod to the other attendant.

"Thank you for your cooperation, sir. I will now lead you inside — please follow me."

At the store attendant's guidance, Rio went into another room, looking around the shop as he walked three steps diagonally behind her. The first floor was a wide open space with several sectioned-off conference rooms for the store attendants to discuss business with potential customers. Rio was led to one such room. The rooms were sectioned off with partitions, so the discussions would be kept private as long as they kept their voices low.

"Please, take a seat here." The girl offered Rio a seat on a soft couch in the room, which he took with a word of thanks. She then sat down on the opposite seat, facing him.

"Once again, welcome to the Ricca Guild. My name is Lotte, and I shall be assisting you today. Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir." Lotte bowed her head politely.

Based on her age, Rio had assumed she was only an attendant in training and expected someone else to come and meet him instead, so he was caught slightly off guard. He wasn't foolish enough to let his discomposure show on his

face, though. Seeing Lotte's mature manners, which rivaled that of a noble daughter, made Rio sure that she was more than adequate to see to him.

Could she be...? Nah.

A ridiculous thought flashed through the back of Rio's mind for an instant, but he immediately dismissed it as highly unlikely. Judging by Lotte's lack of awkwardness, which was typical for a newbie, her capabilities were probably legitimate. Rio braced himself and greeted her respectfully.

"Thank you for your hospitality. My name is Haruto. I am traveling alone due to certain circumstances, so please forgive me for leaving my hood up like this." Rio's greeting was carefully calculated; Lotte wasn't disrespectful enough to ask a customer remove his hood, but if he worded it this way, she'd come to her own conclusion about his circumstances. That being said, she could see a glimpse of Rio's face under the hood from where she sat directly opposite him. The refined features of his appearance that peeked out made her eyes widen a little in surprise.

"That should be just fine, sir, as it causes no inconvenience on our behalf. Now, would it be alright if we moved on to business?"

Faint flames of curiosity ignited in Lotte's eyes, but her customer service smile did not wane. She had no intention of intruding on her customer's privacy, so she got straight to the point.

"Yes, I have come today to inquire about purchasing pasta. If they can be preserved to last longer in storage, I would like to purchase some in bulk. I'd like some other ingredients and spices, too."

"I see. We do have a dried type of pasta available for purchase. As long as it's not left in a hot and humid environment, we can guarantee that it will last at least a year in storage."

"May I ask what the price is?"

"Certainly. We charge one large copper and five small coppers for every 500 grams."

"Thank you. And how much do you charge for barley?" Rio asked, placing a hand against his mouth in mock thought.

“One large copper for one kilogram, sir.”

“Then... could I ask you to prepare fifteen kilograms of pasta and ten kilograms of barley for me?”

Lotte’s eyes widened slightly at the figures Rio put out.

That’s quite a lot for your average adventurer... will this be okay?

While fifteen kilograms of pasta and ten kilograms of barley was normal for a merchant intending to resell the product, it was a rather large amount for an adventurer to buy for personal use. On top of that, pasta was still a new product — most of the general public had no idea how much was needed in one serving. Only merchants and nobility really had any sort of understanding of its weight.

Since there had been many cases where misunderstandings had brought conflict to discussions pertaining to business, Lotte double checked that the numbers were correct.

“500 grams of pasta will feed five or six people. Fifteen kilograms will be quite a large amount for one person to consume... Are you sure that this all right with you, sir?”

“Yes. Fifteen kilograms would feed roughly 150 to 180 mouths and cost four small silvers and five large coppers, correct? Those are indeed the numbers I intended.” Rio gave a faint smile, immediately calculating the numbers in his head.

“My apologies, sir. We will prepare fifteen kilograms of pasta and ten kilograms of barley for you immediately.” Lotte bowed her head deeply, impressed at Rio’s instant arithmetic skills.

Just then, a store attendant in her late teens brought in a tray of tea.

“Excuse me,” she said in a quiet voice, and began to pour the tea. The mellow fragrance of the high quality tea leaves wafted through the air, tickling at Rio and Lotte’s senses.

Rio nodded to the attendant in gratitude. “Thank you very much.”

“Please help yourself, sir.” Lotte offered him the tea.

“Thank you. Then, if you don’t mind...” Figuring it would be rude not to touch the offered tea at all, Rio accepted the cup.

The table was a fair distance from the couch, so he picked up the saucer together with the cup and admired their color and design first. Then, after appreciating the color and fragrance, he took a sip of the tea. Lotte found herself unable to tear her eyes away from Rio’s graceful movements.

“Do you enjoy tea often, Mr. Haruto?”

“Yes. I have a female acquaintance who is very fond of drinking tea, and I picked up a lot of relevant knowledge drinking with her.” Rio nodded with a fond smile. He recalled the times when he would drink tea and chat with Celia almost every day. Thanks to those experiences, he had perfected tea-drinking etiquette to a point where he could easily attend a tea party hosted by a noble daughter without any kind of awkwardness.

“Oh, that’s wonderful to hear, sir. People often say that tea is a drink for women to enjoy, so not many gentlemen are interested in it. Might you know what kind of leaf is in this tea?” Lotte asked, expression brightening like a blooming flower.

“Judging by this unique scent and faintly bitter taste, I’d say it is a leaf produced in Lis?”

“That is correct.”

“Then you’re using good quality tea indeed. And I see the tea set is also of wonderful quality. Forgive me for saying this, but from what I can see of the couch, as well as the table... Isn’t the furniture a little too high-quality to be used for greeting small trade customers?” Rio asked, trying to draw out more on the topic from Lotte.

The space they were sitting in was set up with partitions to imitate a private room. The couch and sofa placed there were both of such high quality, they could easily be used in a conference room for high profile guests.

Lotte’s face lit up with a happy smile as she answered Rio with pride. “Fufu, the best business transaction starts with the perfect business environment! That’s our guild motto, sir. And it doesn’t change depending on the scale of the

transaction.”

“...I see. That must be one of the secrets to the Ricca Guild’s sudden growth. With attendants as young and cute as you, Miss Lotte, I can understand why people feel inclined to empty their wallets.”

“Oh, you flatter me.” Lotte covered her mouth with a hand in refined bashfulness.

“No, I truly believe that. I have some other items I am in need of, which I am thinking of purchasing here as well.”

“Fufu. In that case, how about we resume our business discussions? It is the job of a merchant to meet the demands of the customer, after all. We will gladly prepare all the items you need for your journey.”

Thus, Rio and Lotte resumed their talk.

Rio still needed preserved food and various ingredients, as well as the utensils to prepare them, and he was able to purchase all of the items he needed through the Ricca Guild’s service. Some of the items were somewhat pricey, but other items he wouldn’t have been able to find elsewhere, like many of the spices cultivated and imported from the southern islands. And with his main purpose of purchasing pasta accomplished, Rio was extremely satisfied with the outcome of his visit.

“Is there anything else you require?”

“No, that’s all I need. But if your guild also offers mail delivery services, I would like to request that too...” Rio made one last inquiry once all of their business discussions had wrapped up.

He couldn’t leave the Strahl region without sending a letter to Celia.

“We do have that service available, but we don’t deliver to certain regions. Where do you wish to deliver your mail?”

“The capital of the kingdom of Beltrum.” Her favorable answer prompted Rio to tell her his letter destination.

“That won’t be a problem. Your items will take a moment to prepare, so would you like to write your letter during that time?”

“Yes, please.”

Rio paid for his purchases with coins and Lotte left the meeting room to make a few preparations. Not too long after, a female store attendant appeared with some parchment, quill, and ink for Rio to write his letter. Rio accepted the equipment and — after a moment’s hesitation — slouched over the table and dipped the quill in the ink. His hand moved steadily over the parchment and scratched out neat characters.

The letter spoke of his journey so far: that he was in Galarc at the moment, and other little things that happened on the way. He signed it off as ‘Haruto’ at the end. After he finished writing, he waited a while for the ink to dry, then rolled the parchment into a scroll. He used the candle on the table to melt the sealing wax and drip it onto the scroll before sealing it. With the seal of the Ricca Guild on the scroll, the letter was finally complete.

Having the merchant guild that was run by a duke’s daughter responsible for delivering the letter was a lot more reassuring than asking any random organization or individual, as there was a much lower risk of losing the letter or breaking confidentiality.

Rio called over a nearby attendant and informed her that he was done writing. The attendant retreated to the back for a moment before returning with Lotte and the tea-serving attendant from earlier. All of Rio’s purchases had been prepared and left outside the meeting space.

“Please deliver this to Professor Celia Claire of the Royal Academy of Beltrum faculty.” Rio handed the important letter to Lotte.

“Understood. The address is the Royal Academy of Beltrum, for Professor Celia Claire. We will be sure to deliver it, sir. Your order items have also been gathered, so please confirm that everything is present.” Lotte’s eyes widened faintly when she heard the addressee was Celia, but only someone who was next to her would recognize the change in her expression — and only upon close observation.

Rio packed the items into his backpack as he checked them. It was quite a large number of items, but his backpack was large enough to accommodate everything. Once the backpack was packed full, Rio swung it over his shoulder

easily, making Lotte's eyes widen in shock.

"I see that you have a lot of strength. Fitting for an adventurer."

"Traveling can be harsh, after all... I made sure to prepare myself for it. Now, I shall take my leave." Rio said, Lotte's words making him smile. With those parting words, he bowed once and turned on his heel.

"Thank you for your patronage, sir. If you ever pass through Amande again, our doors will always be open to you." Lotte gave her words of farewell, then bowed alongside the attendant next to her. The two kept their heads lowered until Rio had left the building.

Then, once Rio was outside of the premises... "Celia Claire... The prodigious daughter of Count Claire, from the famous sorcerer family. The genius sorceress who graduated early from the Royal Academy," Lotte raised her head and mumbled.

She was aware of Celia's reputation as Beltrum's genius sorceress, despite living here in the Kingdom of Galarc all her life. Because of the fact that simply having good grades wasn't enough to graduate early, an overwhelming amount of excellence and talent had to be displayed in a specific area. That was why early graduates were rare — occurring once in a decade if the Academy was lucky — so any educated individual in a noble circle would be aware of Celia's name.

On top of that, Celia was the youngest graduate in the history of the Royal Academy of Beltrum, making her far more famous than even she realized.

"What a mysterious boy that was, Lady Liselotte." The attendant next to Lotte — or rather, Liselotte — spoke up.

"I wonder if he's a noble son sneaking out to go on a journey. And I'm 'Lotte' right now, Cosette." Liselotte narrowed her eyes and glared at the girl named Cosette.

"By the way, inspection time is over. Aria and Natalie sent a message to hurry back to the estate and finish off the rest of the accumulated paperwork," Cosette reported with slumped shoulders.

"Oh my, then we must make haste." The corners of Liselotte's mouth turned

up in a pleasant smile, making Cosette eye her curiously.

“You seem to be in a good mood today.”

“It was a good change of pace... The business talks were quite fun.”

“Hmm. Ah, I understand now. That boy just now was handsome, wasn’t he?”

“You... are not wrong, but that has nothing to do with it.” Liselotte denied it reflexively out of exasperation, but memories of Rio’s facial features resurfaced in her mind, making her respond in a perplexing way.

Seeing her master’s fascinating reaction made Cosette grin cheekily.

“See? That must be the case.”

“Enough already. I’m going now!”

With a faint blush tinged on her cheeks, Liselotte walked away briskly. Cosette gave a small giggle before following close behind.



Chapter 2: Assassin Girl

By the time Rio left the Ricca Guild, the western skies were already turning red. Once the sun set, the city gates would be closed to any kind of traffic going in or out.

Rio, however, was walking down the main street, leisurely searching for an inn. He had been on a fairly strict schedule on his way here, and had to sleep outside numerous nights in a row. He wanted to rest easy on a proper bed for at least tonight.

As he glanced around at his surroundings, he could see street signs for inns practically everywhere, but he wasn't about to settle for just any old place: there were differences in the facilities that inns could offer, and Rio was searching for one with a bath.

However, the bathtubs of the Strahl region were a little different in appearance to one that a Japanese person might imagine. This was partially due to the fact that water was not as readily available here as in Japan, and the general population's lack of desire to submerge themselves in bath water. This meant that bathtubs deep enough to submerge a person simply didn't exist. In fact, the word 'bathtub' here referred to shallow tubs that only held enough water to wash one's hair and body.

Furthermore, the only ones who washed themselves every day were members of royalty and nobility — commoners would never spend money on baths. This meant that having a bucket filled with water and partitioning a private space away from others was enough to be considered a rather splendid bathing facility.

That being said, even that much would be difficult to find if Rio just wandered into any cheap inn, so as a former Japanese person, he was very selective about the bathtub status of the inn he chose. Just as Rio was pondering between his choices...

"Hey, mister!" A voice suddenly called out to him from behind. Rio turned

around.

There stood a cute local girl in an apron and tunic dress, who looked to be around two or three years younger than Rio, making her around ten years old. The girl looked up at Rio with a bright and friendly smile.

“Um, do you mean me?” Rio asked, pointing at himself.

“Yup! Are you looking for somewhere to stay?”

“Yes, but who are you?”

“I’m working in that inn over there! Would you like to come stay at our place?” The girl asked, pointing at a wooden, three-story building that towered over its surroundings.

She clung to Rio’s arm tightly, as though it was her way of refusing to let a possible customer get away. Despite her young age, she was very good at drawing in business.

“I’m looking for a single room with a bathtub. Do you have something like that available?”

Naturally, Rio wasn’t able to tell whether bathtubs were included by looking at the inn from the outside, so he figured it’d be best to simply ask the person actually working there... All the more so if she had purposely come to him for business. With that in mind, Rio put forth his request conditions. The girl beamed and nodded.

“Yup! We only have individual rooms at our inn. We still have rooms available, and you can even rent a bathtub, too. So... will you choose us? Please?”

The little girl laughed happily, then peered at Rio, catching a glimpse of his face under the hood of his cloak. Her eyes widened by a fraction.

“I guess I will.” If he put it off until too late, there was a chance that all of the free rooms in the city could become taken. This place fulfilled his conditions, so Rio nodded, immediately deciding on it.

“Hehe, yay! One guest, coming right up! Follow me, this way! This way!” With a light blush on her cheeks, the girl pulled Rio’s arm energetically.

Upon entering the inn, the two were faced with a vacant reception desk.

There was a swinging door to the right that led to the cafeteria, where quite a bit of hustle and bustle could be heard from within.

“The fee is paid upfront. It’ll be seven large coppers for one night, dinner included. You can get the bathtub free as a bonus!” Ignoring the commotion within the cafeteria, the little girl explained the prices in a loud and clear voice.

The price was neither cheap nor expensive; for a commoner staying at an average quality inn in a single room, the price tag was to be expected. For reference, staying at a shared room in one of the cheaper inns would have cost less than one large copper.

“Here you are, then.” Rio handed over seven large coppers.

“Thank you for your business! Oh, that’s right... What’s your name? I’m Chloe!” The girl asked with an innocent and professional smile, befitting for her age.

“I’m Haruto.”

“Haruto, okay! You’re probably a little older than me, right? It’s nice to meet you!”

“Yeah, nice to meet you.”

“Hmm... You’re kind of quiet. You seem cool, Haruto. You should take your hood off and smile more! Come on, lets see that smile!” Chloe pouted with a slight look of dissatisfaction at Rio’s calm reply.

“Haha...” It was difficult to smile on command, but Rio did his best.

“Hmm... Okay. I guess that’s acceptable. I’ll lead you to your room now!” The smile returned to Chloe’s face. She nodded, then grabbed Rio’s hand and walked off.

What a bubbly girl, Rio thought with a bitter smile. After being surrounded by impish children during his days in the Royal Academy, meeting someone like Chloe, who actually acted her age, was rather refreshing.

They marched their way up to the third floor, where Rio’s room was. It was around twenty-two square feet in area, with nothing but a bed inside.

“Here we are. You can only lock it from the inside, so don’t leave your

valuables when you leave the room. It's dinner time right now, so you can come down to the first floor once you're ready. Or do you want your bath first?" Chloe explained at the doorway of the room.

"No, I'll eat dinner first."

"Got it. Then call me when you need the bathtub and the water prepared. I think I've explained everything... Do you have any questions?"

"Nope, I'm fine."

"Great. Well, let me know if you need anything. ...Oh, that's right! Many of our patrons are adventurers, so try not to pick fights with them, yeah?" Chloe added as an anecdotal warning.

"All right, got it," Rio said, nodding a bit tiredly. He wished she had told him that during the negotiation stage of his visit, but those kinds of adventurers could be found in more or less every inn, so he gave in.

Adventurers were jack-of-all-trades that belonged to organizations called adventurer guilds, usually specializing in dirty work. They'd act as mercenaries during wars and exterminate monsters and other dangerous beasts during times of peace. Thus, most adventurers tended to be rather rough around the edges. It was common to see drunk adults picking fights with each other on a daily basis.

"Be careful, okay? Even if they're not adventurers, adult men can be really stupid. They get mad quickly and always turn to violence... You might get picked on a little, but since you're still a child, they'll probably let you go without a fight if you just nod along with them," Chloe said with insistence. There was a faint shadow over her face.

"It's all right, Chloe. You have work to do, don't you? You'd better get back before you're scolded," Rio replied, giving her a soft smile.

"Yeah. See you later, then!" With a nod, Chloe turned around. But before she left, she stopped abruptly.

"Umm, if you have some time after dinner... I'd love to talk to you some more. I like my job a lot, but I don't have many friends around my age," she said bashfully.



Rio stepped into the cafeteria to find a large gathering of red-faced adults making quite a racket; it seemed as though business was booming at the inn. Some of the customers were even wearing swords — those were probably the adventurers. They stared after Rio's hooded figure brazenly, but he purposefully ignored their stares. Just as he was looking around for a place to sit...

"Haruto! Welcome! Here, this seat is free."

Chloe, who was working as a waitress inside the cafeteria, noticed Rio and came running. Even with his hood on, she recognized him instantly from his stature. Rio let Chloe drag him to a counter seat.

"I'll bring you your food right away. What would you like to drink? The first drink's on the house."

"What do you have?"

"The free options are beer, wine, and mead. Oh, and tea with milk."

"A beer, then."

"Heh... You can drink something that bitter, Haruto?"

There was no drinking age limit in this world, but it seemed like Chloe was still unaware of the delights of beer. Rio chuckled.

"Yeah. I'm actually pretty hungry right now, so if you could, please bring the food out quickly."

"Got it! Mom's pretty proud of the meal she cooked tonight, so you should look forward to it!" Chloe said, before running into the kitchen. As though they had been waiting for just the right moment, two male adventurers seated at a nearby table stood up.

"Heeey, kiddo. Aren't ya a bit young to be drinking beer, huh?"

"Yeah. Weakling like you should be drinking milk, don't ya think?"

"Tell me about it!"

They were probably drunk already. The red-faced men burst out into hearty laughter as they took the two seats on either side of Rio in an overly familiar

manner. He sighed, his expression twisting at the stink of alcohol on their breaths. The other men nearby grinned as they watched on, treating the spectacle like an appetizer to accompany their booze.

“Hey, you lot! Don’t pick on Haruto. Let him eat his food in peace, okay?” Chloe warned the adults, pushing Rio’s meal at him from the other side of the counter.

“We’re not pickin’ on him, Miss Chloe. We were just startin’ a conversation with a kid we haven’t seen before.”

“Das right. He looks like a new adventurer. We thought we’d give ‘im some pointers, bein’ his seniors and all.” The men argued back at Chloe with cheerful smiles. “Geez. Haruto, you can have as many servings of bread and soup as you want. I baked the bread myself, you know!” Chloe said gently to Rio after sighing in exasperation. The wooden plate that she offered him was stacked with food.

“Wow, it looks delicious. I’m getting seconds later,” Rio said, taking out the cutlery he had prepared beforehand from his pocket and using his knife, fork, and spoon to eat. Chloe had said this meal was her mother’s pride, and he could taste it.

“It’s great. Could I ask you to bring my beer, too?” Rio requested as he elegantly brought the food to his mouth.

“Oh, right,” Chloe nodded absentmindedly and returned to the kitchen.

“Tch, look at them table manners. Think you’re a noble, huh?” The man sitting to Rio’s right clicked his tongue in boredom.

The cafeteria was filled with people eating with their hands, making Rio’s refined use of cutlery stand out. It made him appear as though he was putting on an air of importance, much to the displeasure of the others in the room. They didn’t find it amusing at all.

Rio ignored the man’s words and continued to eat his meal silently, which further enraged the men. They finally snapped in anger.

“Listen here, brat. Your seniors are talking to you right now. At least take off yer hood,” the man to Rio’s right said, before boldly reaching for his hood. *Slap!*

Rio slapped the man's outstretched hand away without looking up. The expressions on the men changed instantly, and the one who had his hand slapped away glared darkly at Rio.

"Seems like someone needs to learn their manners..."

"I could say the same to you. This is our first meeting, is it not?" Rio sighed, objecting to the man in a cold voice and making him greatly furrow his brow.

"What did ya say?"

The atmosphere soured. Until...

"All right, break it up, break it up! Take your fight outside!" Chloe, who was in the middle of bringing the beer over, jumped in between them in a panic.

"Come on, Miss Chloe. This doesn't count as a fight, right? Or are ya givin' this brat special treatment?" The man whose hand was slapped away said, clearly unhappy.

"That's not... my intention..." Chloe flinched at the dark glare the dangerous man sent her.

"Then shut yer trap. I'm going to teach this kid some manners. Hey, boy! Take off your hood and get on your knees. I'll forgive you if ya do that." The man to Rio's right ordered unreasonably with a sharp look.

However, Rio continued to enjoy his meal silently, which rubbed the men the wrong way. The spectators around them sniggered at the sight.

"Heh, he's ignoring them."

"They're being looked down upon. Serves them right," someone said mockingly.

"Y-You..." The two men started to shake with rage at being humiliated.

"H-Haruto! Hurry up and take off your hood!" Chloe fearfully urged Rio to comply.

"...I don't want to." Rio gave an uncomfortable smile and shook his head at Chloe.

"So you're going to ignore what we say and only answer to Miss Chloe. Is that

it? Is that's how you're gonna be, huh?"

"How else should I respond to someone who clearly approached me with ill intent? If there's a correct response, please, do inform me," Rio asked the man with a tired affect in his voice.

Getting involved with something like this is nothing but trouble.

Rio had been raised in the slums where power was everything, but he found that the adventurer's society was rather similar indeed. The way both groups thought was extremely simplistic. For both of them, being looked down upon was the equivalent of defeat, because their livelihoods depended on their strength. They couldn't afford to show any weakness. Even if Rio apologized here, there was no guarantee they'd forgive him. They'd simply push their accusations further, saying something along the lines of "Apologizing means you admit it was your fault."

"...A correct response? Don't change the topic. Right now I'm askin' ya how you're gonna make up for this. All ya need to do is apologize." The man whose hand Rio slapped away insisted on having things his way. Rio let out a mocking huff before moving a slice of meat toward his mouth.

"Do you really wanna learn things the hard way, brat?" The men stood up from their seats with a loud clatter.

"Hey Gene, Assil. Shouldn't you teach the kid a lesson?"

"Yeah, he needs to be knocked off his high horse a little. Especially bein' a newbie and all. Teach him the rules of livin' as an adventurer around here."

The men sitting nearby tried to rile up the men bothering Rio even more. Chloe tried to speak up against them, but was silenced with a single sharp glare. She closed her mouth out of fear.

"Stand up," the man whose hand was slapped away earlier said, grabbing Rio by the collar with his left hand.

The man was nearly two meters tall, so at twelve years old and at 160cm tall, Rio's feet easily dangled in the air. However, the act of grabbing someone's collar in a fight was usually nothing more than an act of intimidation; it occupied your hands and left you defenseless to counterattacks.

“Haha, typical Gene and his brute strength. Go and get ’im, man!” The spectators urged on the man holding Rio up.

If this one’s Gene, then the other must be Assil... Not that it matters. Rio cast his cold gaze over the two men once.

“Tch, you’re one impudent brat.” The man named Gene clicked his tongue, muttering with breath stinking of alcohol.

“You reek. Could you stop talking... No, stop breathing at me?” Rio asked unhappily, twisting his face.

“You asked for it now.”

Gene made a fist with his right hand and swung it at Rio’s face. But Rio moved his hands easily, and in the next moment —

“O-Oww!” Gene screamed. Rio nimbly grabbed Gene’s left hand and twisted it, allowing him to push Gene’s doubled-over body down to the ground.

Gene grimaced from where he was pressed down; he had yet to process what had happened. The same went for everyone else watching them.

“H-Hey! What did you do to Gene?!” Assil demanded, flabbergasted.

“It’s self-defense, obviously,” Rio replied bluntly.

But that wasn’t what Assil wanted to know. He was talking about *how* Rio had pinned Gene so easily, but Rio wasn’t about to disclose that.

“How long are you going to keep that up for?! Let go of Gene already!” Assil clenched his fists impatiently and tried to punch Rio.

Rio let go of Gene and swiftly dodged the incoming fists. They were just the sweeping punches of a wobbly drunk, and Rio had no trouble reading their path and avoiding them.

“Stop dodging me!”

Assil panted for breath, but no matter how many times he swung his punches, they never made contact with Rio. But he persistently kept swinging, so Rio tripped him. Assil went flying through the air.

“No can do,” Rio said with a short laugh at Assil’s fallen figure after his

pathetic tumble.

“Y-You...” Assil’s anger caused him to jump right back up on his feet, but he suddenly froze when he saw who was standing behind Rio. It was Gene, and he had drawn the hidden blade at his waist.

Meanwhile, Rio had noticed Gene’s presence long ago.

“If you use that, I won’t hold back either.” He glanced behind himself, cautiously, and offered that single warning.

“Shut up! As if I could let you walk all over me any more than this... I won’t forgive you even if you beg, you damn brat!” Gene yelled furiously. Suddenly —

“No spilt blood on my floors!”

A woman who seemed to be the proprietress of the inn stepped out of the kitchen, led by a terrified Chloe. She looked to be in her late twenties; this was most likely Chloe’s mother.

Normally, the city guards wouldn’t take action against a brawl between two drunks at an inn, but even they couldn’t overlook fights that resulted in dead bodies.

“Heeey, Rebecca, sweetie. Sorry, but we gotta defend our honor ‘n all that. We can’t jus’ step down so easily,” Gene said, staring at Rio with a crazed look in his eye. It wasn’t that he was reluctant to back down; he clearly had no intention of backing off at all.

The fact he was too drunk to calmly process his thoughts played a large part in his decision-making.

Rio stared back at Gene, who was moments away from lunging at him. *If you don’t want to lose face by picking drunken fights, then you should live more modestly*, he thought to himself in exasperation.

But Rio had no intention of voicing those thoughts out loud and fanning the flames. He had enough of these two troublesome drunks before them, and just wanted to go back to his room and rest. To him, Gene and Assil weren’t opponents worth fighting, so he didn’t want to get any more involved in their troubles than he already was.

Ah, well. If they're going to attack, I wish they'd do it quickly. That way, whatever I do would be in self defense, at least.

Rio's thoughts were starting to take a disturbing turn, but his words could only bring disaster. He could probably provoke them into attacking with some generic taunts, but claiming self defense wouldn't fly too well after inviting the trouble himself. The fight would be deemed both their faults that way. To establish the situation as an undeniable act of self defense, he had to ensure Gene attacked him without provocation in a clear way.

That was why Rio turned the corner of his mouth up into a sneer in a way that only Gene would see. Gene gave a spiteful click of his tongue and threw himself at Rio at full force.

"Mr. Gene!" The proprietress Rebecca yelled, but Gene did not stop. He thrust the knife in his right hand forward, aiming to stab it through Rio's shoulder.

With a small sigh, Rio stuck his right hand out towards the incoming knife. Gene's knife and Rio's hand crossed, but not a drop of blood was spilt. Instead, Gene's large frame soared through the air. Rio had brushed away the hand with the knife and tripped the man's feet up, before throwing him over his shoulder. Gene crashed into Assil, sending the two of them to the floor. Of course, Rio left both Gene and himself unharmed, but — "Gah! Oww..."

Gene's knife was stuck in Assil's thigh. The momentum of the fall had probably flipped it in Gene's hand. Assil groaned in pain, holding down the injured area with a pale face.

"M-Mr. Assil! Are you all right?!" Rebecca left the counter in a panic.

"A-Assil? I-I'm sorry!" Gene apologized through his shock.

"Oww, oww..."

Seeing Assil's face twisted in agony made both Rebecca and Gene lose their calm. "Y-You brat! What did you do to Assil?!" Gene turned the brunt of his rage to Rio.

"What? It was an instance of proper self defense. You're the terrible one here, stabbing your friend like that," Rio replied in an earnest voice.

Though it had been an instance of self defense, Rio felt a strong sense of repulsion from crossing the line of murder — because of Amakawa Haruto within him. However... He was tainted enough by the values of this world to overlook just a little bit of unavoidable damage. That was why he couldn't find it in himself to pity men who got hurt picking on others for their own amusement.

"What? You're the one who did it!" Gene flared up at Rio's words, unable to accept them.

"The knife was in your hand. Since you were the one who decided to thrust it at me, my self defense was more than justified. Or are you telling me to shut up and just let myself get stabbed?"

"Wh... N-No, but..." Gene hesitated, pressured by Rio's indifferent tone and gaze.

"You should stop the bleeding quickly. It's not a fatal wound, but it's not something you should ignore, either," Rio said, causing Gene to turn back to Assil with a gasp.

Rebecca was trying to perform emergency first aid on him, as she had ordered Chloe to fetch some alcohol and a clean cloth.

"I'm going to remove the knife and sterilize the wound. It'll hurt, but you'll have to endure it," Rebecca said, before pulling the knife out of Assil's thigh. He yelled out in pain.

Rebecca washed out the wound with alcohol, then wrapped it with the cloth, instantly staining it blood red.

"W-What should we do? The blood..." The inflexible rule of stopping bloodflow was to put pressure on the artery closest to the heart. However, amateurs tended to fall into a panic and end up only placing pressure on the wound itself. Rebecca was a classic example of such an amateur, as the sight of the bright red cloth sent her into a fluster.

...This lot got what they deserved, but I suppose the owner isn't at fault...

The only ones involved in the fight were Rio, Gene and Assil — Rebecca was an innocent third party. Seeing her desperately attempt to stem the flow of

blood, despite her lack of involvement, was more than Rio could bear. With a sigh, he pointedly approached Assil.

“Please move.”

“Huh?”

Ignoring Rebecca’s confused voice, Rio easily lifted Assil’s larger body up. He was only able to perform this by secretly enhancing his physical body with essence. But to everyone else around them -- including Gene and Rebecca -- it made Rio look like he had a tremendous amount of strength, making them all freeze in confusion.

Rio carried Assil to a corner of the room and untied the makeshift cloth bandage, locating the proper point of pressure to stem the blood flow and retying it tighter. Then, he placed his hand over the wound and chanted the spell for healing.

“Cura.”

A mystical, faint light emitted from Rio’s hand. However, no spell formula -- no magic circle, that is -- appeared alongside it, because Rio’s peculiar constitution prevented him from performing magic. Instead, he imitated the flow of essence in a magic formula to perform the same phenomenon as the magic itself. To anyone with even the slightest knowledge of magic and sorcery, Rio’s actions would seem extremely suspicious. No matter how few commoners could handle magic, using such supernatural abilities in front of others was enough to cause concern. That was why Rio had carried him to this corner, where the onlookers couldn’t get as clear of a view of his treatment.

Thankfully, Assil was squeezing his eyes shut to avoid looking at his red-stained leg, giving Rio a chance to heal him just enough to close the wound. Once more, he carried Assil to where they had been before and laid him down, untying the cloth that had been putting pressure on the blood flow.

“I’ve stopped the bleeding, but you’ll need to refrain from any vigorous activity for at least a week. Otherwise, the wound will open again. It’ll hurt, but you should be fine to walk again starting tomorrow,” Rio explained indifferently to everyone there. They were barely listening with their jaws dropped in shock. A silence fell over the room for a moment. Then —

“A-Are you serious...?”

“He healed him with magic?”

“Hey, could he really be a noble?”

“Shit, this is bad. Touching a noble carries a penalty of death.”

Instantly, murmurs of fear and unrest spread through the room. Rio, however, watched the reactions of those in the room coolly, searching for anyone who noticed the irregularity in his actions. As a result, he determined no one had noticed anything strange. Once he had come to that conclusion, he no longer had any reason to remain in the cafeteria.

“Chloe,” Rio called the name of the girl frozen behind the counter. She had been in the middle of carrying a bucket of water into the room to wash away the blood. The moment Rio saw her jump out of her skin and stumble backwards with her small, frightened body —

“...Sorry. Nevermind. The food was delicious... Thank you for the meal.” Rio gave a slightly sad smile and returned to his room.



The next morning, Rio left the inn before the sun had even risen.

“Thank you very much for healing that injured patron last night. The situation was contained because of you,” Rebecca said, bowed her head deeply towards Rio at the front desk.

“Please don’t worry about it. It’s not something you should be thanking me for, ma’am.” Rio shook his head with a forced smile.

“No, it was my fault... I didn’t intervene sooner.”

“Adventurers fighting in bars is a daily occurrence. You can’t afford to break up each and every one of them. The ones at fault here are the parties concerned: myself, and the other two men.” Rio defended Rebecca so that she wouldn’t feel as guilty.

Last night, Rebecca had been the one to bring water and a bucket to Rio’s room. She had apologized numerous times in that interval, making Rio feel quite badly for her.

“So please, don’t let it bother you. I must be going now,” Rio said, trying to leave as soon as possible.

“Umm, would you like to take a lunchbox with you instead of breakfast? Please wait here just a moment, I’ll go pack it now! I’ll also return your room fees.” Rebecca took a coin purse from the counter; she had probably prepared it beforehand. Rio shook his head in a fluster.

“There’s no way I can accept a refund. I’ve received more than enough service from this inn.”

“Then let me make your lunch, at least. Breakfast is meant to be included in the fee, after all.”

Without waiting for Rio’s reply, Rebecca placed the coin purse down on the counter and made a dash for the kitchen.

She’s an honest and good person, but rather than giving off a wise aura, she seems to be the type to be fooled easily... Rio noted his impression of Rebecca. He looked towards the kitchen to see Chloe and another unknown girl in an apron watching him back. They hid the moment their gazes met with Rio’s.

Chloe... and her little sister? She’s young.

Whereas Chloe was around ten years old, her sister was clearly much younger. Having someone that young helping out at the inn provided more than enough evidence that Rebecca was struggling.

Is this place being run by three girls? I don’t see any sign of a husband. Rio hadn’t seen a proprietor since entering this inn. He had thought that the man might have been working in the kitchen, but the kitchen was being run by Rebecca.

...Well, whatever.

It had nothing to do with him, so Rio decided not to stick his nose into their business any further. It was then that Rebecca returned with a neatly wrapped lunchbox.

“Sorry for the wait. I packed it full of breakfast foods and bread. Chloe woke up early to bake it, so I hope you enjoy it.”

“Thank you for going through the trouble. Please let Chloe know too —”

“Hey! I’m back!”

Just as Rio was thanking her with a smile, a drunken man entered the inn. He spotted Rebecca and wobbled his way over to her.

“Honey! Don’t tell me you’re coming back drunk again!”

“Shut up! I can drink whenever I want to!” With a yell, the man suddenly struck Rebecca.

Rio was surprised, guessing that this was her husband. And judging by how he was coming home drunk in the early hours of the morning, he probably wasn’t a good one.

An unbearable feeling came over Rio, but he didn’t want to act on it and complicate their family matters any more than they already were.

“Ugh...”

But he couldn’t help but feel helpless as he watched Rebecca touch where she was hit in pain. Rio sighed and approached her. He feigned chanting a spell, and manipulated his essence to heal her pain.

“Huh? It... doesn’t hurt anymore? T-Thank you!” Rebecca made a surprised face at the pain disappearing, but instantly understood what Rio had done and bowed her head in gratitude.

“What? What did he do?” Meanwhile, her husband glared at Rio doubtfully. He didn’t understand what Rio had done, and was in a worse mood after seeing Rebecca being defended.

“Stop it! That’s one of our patrons!” Rebecca tried to stand in front of her husband in a panic.

You’ll only get hit again doing that...

Rio was fed up. He knew she was a woman with a high sense of responsibility, but this was rather tactless.

Sure enough, her husband’s temper flared, and he tried to smack her once again. With a sigh, Rio closed the gap between them, neutralized her husband’s

movements, and gently touched the man's head.

"Purgo."

Rio's hand started to faintly glow as he chanted a fake spell once more. Several seconds passed until the husband regained his senses.

"It's a sobering magic. Do you feel refreshed now?" Rio asked in a cold tone.

"Huh...? Y-Yeah. Sorry about that," the husband said, perplexed by his suddenly clear state of mind.

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to Rebecca," Rio said in a tired voice, glancing over at the woman. Her husband turned to the proprietress with a guilty look on his face.

"Sorry."

While he *was* a furious drunk, he didn't seem to be unreasonably violent when sober.

"I-I'm really sorry for the trouble!" Rebecca bowed her head at Rio in extreme gratitude.

"No, I should be the one apologizing. Thank you for the lunch. Bye now." Rio chose to say his farewells before things got more complicated, then left the inn.

Well, that didn't really solve anything...

The scene that had happened in the inn just now would most likely occur again in the future. His actions had been meaningless... A temporary solution at best. The thought made his morning a bit more gloomy.

Time to get a move on. He decided to leave the city and put his bad mood behind him as quickly as possible.

After walking east along the road into the forest for a while, Rio checked to see if anyone was nearby, before deliberately straying off the road. It was still early in the morning, so the forest fog made everything difficult to see. Rio leisurely started to run.

Not long after he'd changed his pace, he discovered a figure lying on the

ground in his path. He stepped toward it to see that a person was there, lying face-down.

Even one step outside of the city walls exposed you to the risk of being attacked by monsters and carnivorous animals; that risk rose exponentially once you entered the forest proper. This person could have potentially been the result of that hazard — but it was possible that they may have just collapsed in the middle of their journey.

With that thought in mind, Rio approached the body.

It wore a robe that covered their entire figure. Judging by the size, Rio thought it was a child.

Why is a child all the way out here...?

It was a little unsettling, but just abandoning them would leave a bad aftertaste in Rio's mouth, so he reluctantly decided to call out to them.

"Hey, are you all right?" he asked as he shook them, but there was no reaction, though he could feel some body heat through the robe.

So they were still alive — Rio relaxed for a moment and tried to peek at their face through the gap in their hood.

Suddenly, the person — a girl, he realized — opened her eyes; they emitted a faint, murderous intent. Rio directed his gaze at the girl's hand, only to see a knife with a long blade clutched in her hand.

The girl thrust the knife towards Rio's body, but he twisted himself around with a flinch, avoiding the attack. The girl's knife had swung through empty space, narrowly missing him. However, it seemed as though she had read his first evade as she seamlessly moved to use a follow-up attack.

With a heavy puff of breath, the girl blew at Rio's neck. In her mouth was a small flute-like pipe — a blowgun.

Rio felt a sting of pain at his neck, making him frown. But he knew he had to create distance between them, first and foremost, and reflexively shoved the girl away, while taking a step back.

The girl's hood fell back, revealing a very cute face and pale orange hair that

reached down to her shoulders. She appeared to be two or three years younger than Rio, but there was a terrifying amount of cold-blooded murderous intent lurking in her scarlet eyes. Two fluffy fox ears grew out of her head, strongly demanding attention to their presence.

A werebeast?! Rio's eyes widened at the girl's features. Suddenly, all the strength in his body drained away as he fell to one knee.

The dart from her blowgun had been covered in a fast-acting poison, Rio determined. He pulled the dart out of his neck with a trembling hand. Then, before the poison could travel throughout his body, he covered the wound with his hand and secretly began to neutralize the poison without the girl's noticing.



The girl assumed he had no form of antidote and watched on, waiting for the poison to circulate through him.

Meanwhile, as Rio administered his detoxification ability, he carefully observed the girl's face. He had read about them in books before, but this was his first time seeing a real werebeast.

Werebeasts and other demi-humans were very rarely spotted if one lived a normal life in the Strahl region, making Rio's surprise justified.

The two stared at each other as Rio continued to remove the poison from his body. Once he deemed himself ready — and checked the strength of his grip — he gave the girl a small smile. The girl finally noticed that the color was, for some reason, returning to Rio's face. Surprise flickered across her emotionless face.

Rio kept an eye on the girl for any movements as he removed his backpack and dropped it on the ground, making him instantly lighter. Now, he was ready for a fight.

In the next moment, the girl burst into a run towards Rio with tremendous speed. She had probably used *Augendae Corporis* beforehand, but even if she did —

She's really fast!

Rio was shocked at how fast her burst of speed was; of all the people he had met, until now, she was definitely the fastest. Despite her young age, her natural abilities as a werebeast had probably awakened... But that didn't mean Rio had to fall behind her. He could manipulate his essence to allow his body to surpass its physical limits, and draw out his abilities too.

Rio let his essence flow out of his body, which instantly strengthened it. Then, at a speed that was equal to the girl's, he dove to the side. The girl's eyes widened slightly at Rio's speed, but she changed her trajectory to match his.

So she's able to keep up...

Rio tracked her movements calmly as he took out a knife from his robe. He threw it at her leg, but the girl jumped to evade it. She grabbed a moderately

sized branch and pulled herself up, jumping lightly from branch to branch to climb up a tree. Rio burst into a run — faster than the wind, he charged straight towards the girl, making her reach into her robe in a panic. She took out several throwing knives and flung them at Rio.

Rio drew his longsword from its scabbard midair; although it wasn't anything flashy, a fairly famous blacksmith had forged its razor-sharp blade. As proof of that, the blade of the sword gleamed sharply. Rio swung his sword at the approaching knives —

The shrill sound of metal colliding with metal echoed throughout the forest. Rio had foreseen the trajectory of the girl's knives and knocked them straight out of the air. He returned his sword back to its sheath as the girl swiftly descended from the tree. At the same time, Rio jumped up into the tree where the girl had just been.

The force of his jump snapped the branch beneath him, making him move to another nearby branch instead. Then he dropped down to the ground once more... But the girl closed in on him, as she had anticipated the timing of his landing. She thrust the knife in her right hand towards Rio's torso, but Rio calmly moved his left hand, parrying her knife attack. He then moved his right hand too; using the palm of his hand, he countered the girl's attack with a blow to her chin. But the girl moved her head to the side, evading his palm. She spun the knife around in her hand, attempting another strike on Rio's body.

There was probably poison on the knife too.

Rio used his flawless defensive movements and refined footwork to skillfully continue to dodge her attacks, but the girl refused to give up. She persistently tried to land one more attack.

Her fierce attacks continued on for a while, but Rio observed her movements meticulously, and avoided each of her attacks with simple precision. Only the pitiful sound of the blade cutting through empty space echoed through the air.

Eventually, the girl became aware of the difference in their ability. Her emotionless face began to show signs of impatience as her movements gradually became rougher. Rio had seen through the girl's habits, and at this point, was deliberately creating chances for her to attack. The girl completely

fell for his trap, swinging the knife horizontally at his face.

You're focusing on the knife too much.

Rio flung himself backwards to avoid the knife. Simultaneously, he timed a kick to the girl's feet just as she swung her knife, and knocked her off balance. He then grabbed the girl's arms and disarmed her of the knife, throwing it away with vigor. He flung the girl back-first at a tree, but she flipped midair to regain her balance and landed by the tree on both feet, negating her momentum. She kicked against the trunk like a springboard, and launched herself back into the air, drawing a backup knife from her pocket. She thrust it forward, aiming for Rio's heart.

It's like watching an animal move... Rio found himself in awe of the girl's combat senses, but he dealt with it calmly.

Grabbing her arm as she leapt towards him, he threw her over his shoulder and onto the ground with force.

"Guh...!" She received the brunt of the impact against her back this time, making her groan in pain. The strength in her limbs gave out, making her let go of the knife. Rio kicked the knife away and straddled the girl's body, holding her down.

"It's over. You can understand my speech, right?" he said, pressing his weight down on her. He didn't miss the brief flicker of fear in the girl's emotionless eyes.

"Uuh... Uwah! N-No! No! Nooo! I dun... I dun wanna die...!" She struggled, shaking her head about in violent discomposure.

"H-Hey, calm down!" Rio said, trying to soothe the desperate girl.

"E-Eek! S-Save me! Mom! Mama...!"

It was hard to believe this was the same girl who had just fought so calmly before. She was in no state to hold a conversation — once he determined that, Rio placed his hand on the girl's head and imitated sleep magic to put her to sleep by force. The girl's body fell completely limp.

Rio removed a rope from his sack of belongings; In order to make sure she

didn't thrash about when she awakened, he'd remove her robe and inspect her body before securely tying her up. But halfway through the process, he noticed a metal collar around her neck, and frowned.

"...The Collar of Submission, huh?" Rio muttered with furrowed brows.

The Collar of Submission was a type of magical artifact used on slaves and criminals — an artifact that controlled the free will of the wearer. When the wearer received an order from a registered owner, they would feel greatly inclined to follow that order. On top of that, if they resisted the order too strongly, the registered owner could chant a certain spell to cast extreme pain on the wearer.

Slaves were seen as property that could be owned. They had no human rights, and could be treated like objects without resistance, no matter what they really thought inside their hearts. That was what slaves were, and the Collar of Submission existed to supplement that.

This werefox girl, who had just tried to kill Rio, was wearing such a collar, unmistakably making her the slave of someone else. She had probably been raised as an assassin and ordered to kill Rio by her registered owner. As long as she had the Collar of Submission on, she would continue her attempts to kill Rio. If she didn't, she would have to suffer erratic shocks of pain throughout her body.

It was almost like a curse... To both the girl, and to Rio.

There weren't many options to escape that curse, either: the fastest option would be to kill her, but Rio had never killed anyone before. Amakawa Haruto inside him still strongly rejected the idea of crossing that line. But at the same time, he knew that choosing to solve this another way would only bring him more hardship.

Unable to hide his annoyance, Rio let out a heavy sigh.

After several moments of hesitation, he placed his hand against the girl's neck. Then, a faint light emitted from his hands — *Clack!* The collar that had restrained the girl fell off. Rio had dispelled the sorcery cast on the artifact by imitating the high-class magic, *Dispello*.

“Hey. Wake up.”

Rio retrieved the Collar of Submission and shook the girl awake.

“Ngh... uhh...”

After a few shakes, the girl’s body gave a twitch. Not long after, she blinked her eyes open. Then, seeing Rio’s figure in her field of vision, she tried to get up in a panic, but soon realized she was restrained.

After a bit of struggling, she came to accept the fact that her movements had been completely constrained, and she cowered in resignation. She looked up at Rio with wary eyes.

“It seems like you understand the situation now. If you don’t want to die, don’t thrash around like you did before. Okay?” Rio decided to intimidate her a little with a threat, but fear filled the girl’s eyes.

“...If I don’t... thrash... you won’t... kill?”

“That depends on whether you answer my questions or not. You were ordered to come kill me, right? Is your master one of the royals of Beltrum, or one of the nobles?”

The girl fell silent at Rio’s question. She had probably been under strict orders to never act in a harmful way toward her master. Breaking that order would have resulted in extreme pain gnawing away at her body, making her instinctively want to avoid speaking, even though Rio had already removed her collar.

“Hey. Do you know what this is?” Rio held the Collar of Submission up for her to see the same collar she had been wearing moments ago.

“A c-collar...?!”

The girl gave a confused reply, immediately followed by a gasp. Her eyes widened. She desperately wriggled her body under her restraints to check for the sensation of the collar. Eventually, she realized that the sensation of something that should’ve been there was missing.

“It’s... gone... The collar... is gone? But... why?” The girl blinked her eyes in utter astonishment.

After a moment, she snapped back to herself with a gasp, then struggled to check the presence of the collar once more...

“Eh... w-weh... hic... hic... Waaaaah!”

...Then burst into violent tears.

“Hey...” Rio found himself at a loss before the girl’s flood of tears. All he knew was that the Collar of Submission must have weighed heavily on her.

With a sigh, Rio decided to let the girl cry all she wanted for now. He took that time to go and collect all the weapons they had used in their battle.

“...Are you done yet?” Rio asked as her cries finally started to settle down. The girl flinched, and worriedly looked up at him.

“The collar is gone now, so you can answer my questions, right? Who ordered you to come kill me?”

“Ah, uh...”

The girl didn’t respond right away to Rio’s question. She glanced around at her surroundings, and sniffed the air.

“I don’t know what you’re so wary for, but it’s only you and me out here. You can rest easy,” Rio said, making the girl’s body shake once again. Eventually, she opened her mouth.

“I-I... d-don’t know the name... of my master... He never... told it... to me...”

It was more or less the response Rio had been expecting. Having a slave for the risky role of an assassin meant the master probably didn’t allow any more information to be passed on than necessary.

“...Do you know the house name?” He didn’t have very high expectations, but he asked anyway.

“H-House name? I don’t... know.” The girl tilted her head in confusion as Rio gave a disappointed sigh.

“B-But! I know... I know Brother’s name! Stewart... I-It’s Stewart!” The girl strung together her sentences in a rush. Rio narrowed his eyes at her response.

It was a very familiar name to him. The same name as the boy who tried to

push the blame for shoving Flora off the cliff onto Rio. If his family had found out about Rio, it would make sense for them to send their pet assassin after him.

“Stewart... Is he a werefox like you?”

“...Brother... isn't... a werebeast. He's human. T-The one who trained me.”
The girl shook her head furiously from side to side.

“Trained? If he's a human, then that means you're not related... right?”

Rio frowned slightly at the mention of a brother. It was hard to believe she could have one. While he knew it was possible that she could have been the child of another slave, he didn't want to jump to any hasty conclusions, so he asked just to make sure.

“I don't... know...” The girl bobbed her head without confidence.

“...Let me change my question. Where did you follow me from?”

“The... same place... as you.”

“So the capital of Beltrant, huh.”

“Probably... Th-There were lots... of pretty houses.”

“I see. Then, is there anyone other than you who's trying to kill me?”

“...I-I don't know. But... probably not... I think.” the girl replied feebly.

“Okay. Here's my last question, then.”

Instantly, Rio's aura darkened dangerously. He gazed deeply into the girl's eyes. She couldn't look away, and swallowed nervously as she waited for Rio's question.

“...Do you still intend to kill me?”

“I-I won't kill.” The girl trembled, shaking her head stiffly.

The eyes were a window to the soul; no matter what kind of expression was pasted on the face, some form of emotion would always reach the eyes. Rio could no longer observe the calm killing intent she had carried in her eyes before. While she was fairly terrified at the moment, she didn't seem to have any other hidden agenda.

“...All right, you’re free. I’ve left all your weapons with your robe over there,” Rio declared with a sigh as he began to untie the girl’s restraints.

“Huh...?” The girl made an expression of confusion.

“I’m saying: you can get away from here. Without a collar to control you, you no longer need to return to your master. Though... I guess that makes you a runaway slave now,” Rio said with a rather sullen look. He understood that even if he released this girl here, she didn’t have many options available to her.

There were no human settlements in the Strahl region where a demi-human could live alongside humans in peace. This meant that it would be impossible for a werefox like her to live with humans. However, even if she were to live away from humans, she had been born a slave — it was hard to believe she was taught any form of self-sufficiency. She had been controlled by the Collar of Submission, but it hadn’t been the only thing restricting her. If she wanted to continue living in the Strahl region, she’d have to become slave property to someone.

That was her reality.

The girl had yet to understand that herself. She stared back at Rio with a blank look on her face, tilting her head a bit with worry.

“...If you leave this country and head east, there’ll be a vast area called the Wilderness. There should be land there where demi-humans like you live,” Rio said; he had opened his mouth before he realized he did.

“The... Wilderness? East...?”

“East is the direction I’m heading in... Beltrum is to the west. You’d be better off finding your own kind in the Wilderness than staying in these lands.”

“Own kind... East... Wilderness...” The girl muttered to herself. A glimmer of hope appeared in her eyes.

She had no idea what to do with her newfound freedom, but with Rio’s guidance, she now had a vague hope for her future. Rio watched her silently for a moment, before speaking: “I’ll be off, then. Just a warning, but the next time you attack... I won’t hold back.”

He started to walk off, reassured that he had indeed granted the girl her freedom from the Collar of Submission. However, that was simply because the girl — no, the reason was because he didn't want to kill anyone. That was why he had no obligation to oversee what the girl did from here. He repeated this reasoning to himself in his heart.

The girl instantly adopted the expression of an abandoned puppy.

“Ah-”

She reached a hand towards Rio's departing figure and let out a small sound, before quickly drawing her hand back in. She paced around that spot for a while. Once Rio had completely disappeared from sight, she hesitantly started to follow his footsteps.

Plod plod, plod plod. She followed along at a distance, making sure not to lose sight of Rio walking ahead.

Now that she was free from slavery, she had nowhere to return to. She would never go back to that place where she had been a slave ever again. With that, she only had one place she could possibly go: the Wilderness that Rio told her about. But without a map, nor a sense of the land, she was scared of moving forward aimlessly. And if she wanted to rely on someone else, then there was naturally only one option. She chose to follow Rio, who seemed to be heading in the same direction.

That was how far backed into a corner she was. To rely on the person she had tried to kill... Though it had been under someone else's order, she couldn't help but feel guilty about it. There was also the possibility of him rejecting her if she asked for his help outright. As a result, her selfish desires made her choose to sneakily follow after him.

A few minutes of walking through the forest later, Rio suddenly came to a stop.

“Come out,” he said loudly over his shoulder.

The girl flinched. She was sure she had hidden her presence, so she wondered how he had noticed her... But she was more than well aware that she couldn't win against Rio, no matter how much she struggled. Without thinking too much

on it, she revealed herself to him.

“Do you still want something from me?” Rio asked the trembling girl.

“U-Umm... I want... to go... east... with you,” The girl answered falteringly. Rio placed his right hand against his head and heaved a sigh.

“Are you serious?”

“I-I want... to go.” The girl bit down on her lip and nodded.

“...You may be misunderstanding something here. I didn’t release you from slavery because I wanted to save you. It was just more convenient for me to choose not to kill you.”

To put it bluntly: he didn’t want to carry around the weight of a murder. That was why he had removed the girl’s Collar of Submission. He wasn’t completely apathetic to the girl’s situation, but he definitely didn’t act out of pure intentions. That was his thinking behind all of this.

“B-But I-I don’t know... what... to do,” The girl muttered, ducking her head with tears in her eyes. Rio scratched his head awkwardly.

“...I’m a human. The same species as the people that treated you as their slave. Aren’t you afraid?”

“You... don’t... seem bad.” The girl shook her head.

Rio had a vague feeling this would happen from the moment he removed her collar. Considering the girl’s circumstances, it made sense. That was why he had purposefully made sure to walk away, just in case the girl decided to pursue him. Sure enough, here they were. But did this girl really understand what it meant to move together with the person she had tried to assassinate just moments ago...?

“Have you considered how I might feel about you, after you just tried to kill me?” Rio asked flatly. The girl’s face fell aghast.

“Ah! I-I’m sorry! The collar... hurt so much, I...” She began to apologize in a panic, tears dropping from her eyes.

“I’m not actually angry. I don’t know what kind of pain you suffered from the collar, but I know you only tried to kill me because you couldn’t disobey it. But

that doesn't mean I have any proof you won't attack me again. In other words, I can't trust you. Do you understand that?" Rio explained with a troubled sigh.

It was true that a part of him didn't mind bringing the girl along with him, but at the same time, he wasn't exactly at ease with the idea of traveling alone with an unknown former assassin.

"T-Then, the collar! You can... You can put it on me! P-Please. Take me... with you," she begged frantically through her tears.

"The collar... Didn't you hate wearing that thing?" Rio asked in near exasperation at the girl's failure to understand the weight of her words.

"I don't... want to be... alone. I'm... scared. So... please," she sniffled and sobbed with her head down, making Rio feel even more uncomfortable. An extremely uneasy expression fell over his face as he clenched his hands into fists. He sighed for the umpteenth time.

"All right. Do as you please," he declared, giving in. He weakly reasoned to himself that it was better to move together than have her secretly follow him.

"Huh...? Ah... O-Okay!" The girl hesitated for a moment before nodding enthusiastically.

"We're going to go back to the city first. Come." Rio came up with that plan of action after glancing over the girl's body.

"U-Umm, are you... going to put the collar on me?" The girl hesitantly asked Rio's back as he began to walk off.

"I threw that away long ago. Let's go already; we can only travel for so many hours a day," Rio replied as he walked briskly.

"W-What... are we doing... there?"

"You don't have the proper equipment. We have to prepare your share of supplies for the journey."

The girl was only wearing a single, thin layer of clothing under her robe, which wasn't appropriate for the long journey they were about to take. He also had to buy more food supplies to make up for her share.

"T-Thank... you."

“...Put your hood on inside the city. Otherwise things will get messy,” Rio said, glancing at the girl stumbling to keep up with his pace.

“Okay!” she nodded happily.

“By the way, what’s your name?” Rio suddenly came to a stop to ask the girl for her name.

“It’s... Latifa!”

“I see. You might know this already, but I’m... Rio. Nice to meet you, Latifa.” With a small sigh, Rio introduced himself somewhat reluctantly.



After they went shopping, Rio and Latifa departed from Amande once more. While it wasn’t as huge as Rio’s, Latifa now had a large backpack on her back as well.

Then, once they were out of Amande, Rio tried running through the forest at his usual speed. He was testing Latifa’s stamina. As a result, they discovered she couldn’t last for very long while carrying a heavy backpack. Once they knew Latifa’s limits, Rio slowed his movement speed to a pace that she could keep up with. They took breaks more frequently than usual, too.

As they sat down on some boulders next to a spring in the forest, Latifa’s stomach growled loudly. Rio looked at her with widened eyes.

“I-It’s nothing! I’m... I’m not hungry!” Latifa shook her head furiously, blushing bright red.

“You don’t have to hold yourself back. It’s way past time for breakfast,” Rio said in amusement, reaching into his backpack for the sandwich Rebecca made him. He cut it in half with a cooking knife and offered it to Latifa.

But Latifa merely looked at the sandwich in confusion. Her eyes moved between the sandwich and Rio’s face several times.

“What’s wrong?”

“I-I can... eat this?” Latifa asked Rio hesitantly, gauging his reaction.

...I guess she’s never been allowed to eat without permission before. Rio

hazarded a guess at the reason for Latifa's question.

That was exactly the case: Latifa had been raised to only do as she was ordered to. If she moved of her own free will, she would have been disciplined. Thus, she had picked up the habit of asking for permission before doing anything herself. Her existence relied entirely on others. Releasing her from slavery wouldn't solve those habits immediately.

By engaging with her, Rio was slowly able to analyze the issues regarding her personality and mental state... But changing her state of mind wouldn't be easy.

He would just do what he could, helping her little by little during their time together.

"There's no need to hold back — feel free to eat it. What do *you* want to do, Latifa?" Rio asked.

"...I w-want... to eat it." After a moment's pause, Latifa voiced her own thoughts.

"Okay, then eat it." With a gentle smile, Rio handed her the sandwich.

Latifa stared at the sandwich in her hands intently. To make her feel more at ease, Rio started to eat his sandwich first, prompting Latifa to slowly put her's in her mouth.

"I-It's delicious."

Once she had confirmed the taste, her next bite was a hurried chomp.

"Om, nom nom...! Mmhgh... nom... nnn... uguu..." Latifa furiously stuffed her cheeks with the bread, but began to cry midway.

Having been born a slave, this sandwich was the greatest delicacy she had ever tasted in her entire life.

"I won't take it from you, so eat it slowly. It's not good for you to eat like that." Rio sat down next to Latifa and patted her back gently.

"Wah... *hic*... Every day, Brother would... *hic*... when feeding me... waah..." Latifa choked on her tears as she recalled her meals until now.

Just how horribly was she treated during her mealtimes? Rio didn't even want

to think about it. He continued to pat her back soothingly until she calmed down.



Rio refilled the flask with water using his essence, then offered it to Latifa after she stopped crying.

“Here’s some water.”

“T-Thank you...” Latifa nodded her head and started to gulp it down as Rio drank from his filled flask, too. He couldn’t quite find the right words to say.

“...We’ll be setting off in a bit. I want to cross the country border and enter the Wilderness by the day after tomorrow. Today, we’ll go as far as we can... At worst, we can camp in the forest if need be.”

“O-Okay.” Latifa rubbed her eyes with the sleeve of her robe and nodded.



As they had discussed, Rio and Latifa dedicated as much time as possible to moving forward, heading towards the far east kingdom of Galarc.

Before the sun began to set, Rio discovered a low area of ground suitable for camping and pitched a suggestion to his traveling companion.

“Let’s set up camp for today. I’ll fix up a place for us to sleep, so you wait there.”

“A place... to sleep?” Latifa tilted her head in wonder. She seemed to be questioning if they had any materials to create such a thing, since their backpacks were mostly stuffed with food supplies.

“I’m going to make it myself. Stand back a bit.” Rio gave a small smile as he drew the sword at his waist.

He marched towards a moderately-sized tree and leapt at it, swinging his sword around at a speed faster than the eyes could follow. The next moment, thick branches of the tree rained down from above.

“Wow...” Latifa said with widened eyes.

Rio picked up an especially thick branch from the selection scattered about. He stabbed it into the ground at the edge of the lowered pit, fixing it in place. It would serve as the main pillar of support for the shelter he was about to build.

Next, he stuck branches on both sides of the pillar, diagonally into the ground,

positioning them like a triangle and using rope to reinforce the structure. At this point, it formed a tall tent shape.

Then, he covered it in greenery to make it blend in naturally with their surroundings. The leaves also helped cover any gaps to block out the wind and rain. All that was left to do was make a door and similarly camouflage it before the simple tent was complete. Since the forest at night was cold and the weather unpredictable, it was worth the trouble of building such a shelter.

Seeing how fast he had constructed such a wonderful shelter made Latifa gaze at Rio with sparkling eyes of awe. With a forced smile, Rio started a fire near the tent entrance.

“Okay, time to make our meal. Can you fan the smoke into there?”

“Fan... the smoke?”

“Just make the smoke blow into the tent. It acts as an insect repellent.”

“O-Okay. Leave it... to me!” Latifa nodded earnestly.

Rio picked up his backpack and walked a bit of distance away from the campsite, to avoid leaving the scent of food near the tent in case beasts roamed by at night. He picked an appropriate place to begin cooking; today’s menu would be pasta soup.

First, he built a simple base to place the pot on and filled it with water, lighting a fire underneath to warm it up. Then, he did the same for a deep frying pan, oiling it with vegetable oil. He placed cuts of dried meat and wild grasses he picked on their way here into the pan, added seasoning and spices before beginning to fry it up. He would occasionally use his essence to create a gust of wind, casually blowing the smell of the food directly up into the air.

Meanwhile, the water in the pot had reached a rolling boil, so he added some salt and let it simmer. Then, he dropped the pasta into the pot, radiating it out from the center. He turned down the heat and stirred the pasta lightly; it boiled as he adjusted the temperature of the bubbling water.

As soon as it was done, he transferred the pasta to the frying pan, cooking everything together at a low heat. Then he poured in the broth and adjusted the flavoring to complete the pasta soup. Rio preferred his food spicy, but he

held back so a child like Latifa could easily eat it.

Hm? He suddenly sensed a presence behind him, making him whirl around.

It was Latifa, lured by the smell of the food.

Her nose twitched cutely as she sniffed the air. Seeing the typical fox-like behavior made Rio chuckle with a smile. Latifa noticed him laughing at her, and blushed in response.

“Come on, food’s done. Let’s have dinner,” Rio said, picking up the frying pan. He served the pasta soup into containers and carried them to a makeshift table he had put together earlier.

“Spaghetti? Is this spaghetti?!” Latifa took one glance inside the container and yelled in astonishment.

“...You know what this food is?” Rio asked his question in a daze, though at first, he had been at a loss for words for a moment.

“I... know! I... know it! Can I... eat it?” Latifa nodded furiously, looking up at Rio with expectant eyes.

“Of course. Eat up before it cools.”

“T-Thank you!”

Once she’d received permission from Rio, Latifa smiled a carefree smile, eyes sparkling as she began to eat the pasta. Rio watched her in contemplation. The noodle-like food called ‘pasta’ had only appeared in this Strahl region recently. On top of that, it was only sold in a limited number of areas at the moment. Rio was sure he had never seen pasta in the kingdom of Beltrum, at least.

Furthermore, Liselotte — the inventor of pasta — had never called it *spaghetti*. And yet, Latifa had taken one glance at the pasta and called it just that. She was even using the fork and spoon with skill, moving the pasta into her mouth with familiarity.

What exactly could this mean? Rio’s thoughts came to a stop.

“Omf, om nom nom.” Latifa was engrossed with gobbling down the steaming hot pasta.

“...You’ll burn your tongue like that. Slow down a little,” Rio warned her gently, fearing she would hurt herself.

“Om — hah, hot!” Sure enough, Latifa burned her tongue. Rio smiled bitterly.

“Here, water.”

“Ah, t-thank you.” Latifa accepted the flask from Rio and brought it to her mouth in a hurry.

“Apparently, this food is called pasta. Have you had it before?” Rio inquired once Latifa drank the water and calmed down.

“Fweh? Pasta? Ah... umm, yes. I used... to eat it.” Latifa’s expression suddenly stiffened, fearing she had done something bad. But after a moment, she fixed an uncomfortable smile on her face and nodded with feigned enthusiasm.

“I see. No wonder you seem familiar with eating it. That’s great,” Rio said, as though he was impressed. But on the inside...

She’s never received a proper education, yet she knows how to use cutlery and eat high-class food... there’s just too many factors that can’t be dismissed anymore. Pasta isn’t even in circulation in Beltrum’s markets yet...

Rio calmly deduced that Latifa was either lying or hiding something from him. And he had one theory he was fairly certain was close to the truth — that Latifa also had memories of a previous life.

However, Latifa’s language abilities seemed a little too underdeveloped for that to be the case, Rio thought. From his interactions with her up until this point, he could tell there wasn’t much of a difference between her mental age and her appearance. If anything, they matched up perfectly.

Perhaps it was because of her slave upbringing, but her mental instability made her seem all the more child-like. At the very least, she didn’t appear to have any experience with society in her previous life. Of course, it was possible that it was all an act, but Rio couldn’t imagine a need for her to do that.

Which meant that she wasn’t much different in age — an elementary school-aged child — in her previous life.

However, if that was the case, then that would mean Latifa had suffered a

much more tragic second life than Rio. A child living in the prosperous modern Japan had suddenly been stripped of her human rights and made into a pet slave, after all. If she had been born and raised as a slave, she would have never known any better, but that all changed once she regained her memories of her previous life. She would have lived her life yearning to be free from slavery, to return to her former world. Her pain and fear would have far surpassed anything Rio could imagine.

Not being allowed the freedom to live.

Not even being allowed the freedom to die.

Just imagining the circumstances Latifa had been placed in made him feel sick.

She should be less than ten years old at present; he didn't know how old she had been when her memories returned, but if it was at the same age as Rio, then she would have been six. Even if Latifa was an elementary school student in her previous life, she wouldn't have had more than ten years of life experience. Simply merging those two young lives together didn't mean their life experience had advanced further. Rio had the feeling he knew why Latifa appeared and behaved as she did. And at the same time, he knew why she seemed a bit unstable, as well.

"Fuu, fuu."

At the moment, Latifa was wholeheartedly eating Rio's cooking. At some point, her eyes had even welled with tears, but her expression was one of happiness. Once she finished the last bite, she licked the empty bowl with regret.

"There's still some left for seconds. You can eat more... Here." Rio took Latifa's bowl and served her another helping.

"T-Thank you!" Latifa smiled happily and bowed her head.

Rio had completely lost his appetite, so he forced down his own first serving and gave the rest to Latifa.

Interlude: Latifa's Memory

After I — Endo Suzune — blacked out on the bus, I woke up to find myself in a dark room made of stone, lying across the floor.

There was a chill in the air, making me shiver and rapidly arousing my senses; the room felt like a cool, air-conditioned room in the middle of summer. I was wearing a single, thin layer of clothing that felt stiff and coarse on my skin. On top of that, I only had a thin blanket on me. No wonder I was cold.

My neck felt oddly heavy — there was a metal collar and chain around it.

What... is this?

An icy chill shot down my spine as I drew the blanket tighter around me. I curled up, trying to retain warmth. Then, as my small body shivered, I fearfully looked around the room.

Where... am I?

It was a dreary room with no furniture or windows. There was no room like this in my memories, yet for some reason, something didn't feel right. It was almost as if I had seen it before, but not... Like an indescribable sense of déjà-vu.

At that moment, the door opened with a clack. My shivering body flinched. I hesitantly turned my gaze towards the sturdy door to see a small boy standing there. He seemed to be in a bad mood, as his face was marked by a combative expression.

I unintentionally let out a shriek. "Eek!"

Because I — no, the other me inside myself — knew the boy before me.

His name was Stewart.

We weren't related by blood, but he made me call him 'Brother' and treated me like a pet, under the pretense of discipline.

"Hm? What? What's this?" Seeing my reaction, Stewart's expression lit up

happily. Then, like a child that had obtained a new toy, he came over to me at a half-run.

“Eek! S-Stay... away!”

On the spur of the moment, I spoke words that weren't in Japanese; it wasn't a language that I recognized as an elementary school student from Japan. However, my words came out with a lisp, faltering strangely in pronunciation.

“Hey, what's up with you today? Why are you acting so lively?” Stewart asked me with a radiant smile, making me curl my body up reflexively into a defensive position.

“D-Don't... hit me... please!”

To not disobey this person was ingrained into me at an instinctive level.

“Wow, you never talk this much. You should react like this all the time... Then I could treat you a little differently, at least.” Stewart laughed with a grin, then yanked harshly on the chain extended from my collar.

“Kya!” I lost balance and tumbled to the floor.

“Hey, Latifa. Show me your face properly.”

Latifa. That was what Stewart called me as he pulled on the chain, and my face was brought before his eyes. He seemed to be excited, as his breath came out in rough pants that made my whole body break out in disgusted goosebumps.

“Eek... N-No...” I cried tearfully and shook my head. Stewart's face dropped with displeasure.

“Why are you speaking so disrespectfully? What am I to you?”

“M-My B-Brother.”

“That's right. So what was that just now?”

“I-I'm... sorry! Forgive... me... please!”

“You really are quite talkative today. I normally have to order you to do so before you open your mouth. What's wrong with you?” Stewart asked me, but that was what I wanted to ask.

“I-I don’t... know!”

My name was definitely Latifa... But at the same time, I was also Endo Suzune.

“...Hmm. Well, whatever.” Stewart examined my face for a reaction, but soon lost interest. Relief washed over me, but his next words pushed me to the bottom of the pit of despair once more.

“I came because I was feeling irritated, but now I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to play with you today.”

Understanding the ill intent behind his words, my face instinctively twisted in misery. Stewart carved a threatening smile onto his face with a grin. The more my reactions showed on the surface, the more happiness he would gain from tormenting me. The other me inside of myself — Latifa — was already aware of that. That was why Latifa had completely suppressed her own mind.

But Endo Suzune was different.

Yes... the Endo Suzune part of me strongly resisted and detested the fact I was a slave.

From that day onward, my nightmare of a reality began.

Chapter 3: Connection

Two days after their departure from Amande, Rio and Latifa finally crossed the border to the eastern region of the Galarc Kingdom.

From this point on was the Wilderness, where their first challenge immediately awaited them. The Nephilim Mountains were a mountain range that divided the Wilderness from the region of Strahl in a single vertical line, with a height ranging from 2000 meters to 5000 meters. Furthermore, more mountains continued past the mountain range; a vast wasteland that was of no benefit for the humans of Strahl to venture into. Thus the name: the Wilderness.

To cross over the gate to that isolated land, Rio was sprinting at full speed. Behind him was Latifa's small figure.

"How are you holding up?" Rio called out to Latifa, who was running behind him. He stopped along the mountainside.

"I'm... all right," Latifa answered with a nod, but her breath was coming out a bit roughly. Meanwhile, Rio's expression was still calm and comfortably at ease.

"It's a little early, but let's set up camp for today. I'll get everything ready, so you can rest. Make sure you rehydrate yourself," Rio said, marking the end of their travel for the day. At that, an expression of fear appeared across Latifa's face. She hurriedly bowed her head.

"I-I'm... sorry!"

"...Why are you apologizing?" Rio asked calmly.

"I'm... slowing you... down. Ah... W-Will you leave me... behind?" Latifa asked, hanging her head.

The second half of her sentence was so quiet, it faded before it could reach Rio's ears. But, he could pretty much guess what she had said from the mood in the air.

“You’re not being a burden at all. We’re in the mountains right now — if we rushed forward too hastily, we’d end up with altitude sickness. That’s why we’re camping here now. It’s out of necessity.”

Rio scratched his head as he tried to explain everything with as gentle of a tone as possible. Hearing that, Latifa sighed with relief. Since making his inference about Latifa’s circumstances, Rio was doing his best to treat her as kindly as possible, talking to her whenever he could. By doing that, he figured he could clear away some of her anxieties and prompt her to participate in more conversations, developing her language abilities.

However, Rio wasn’t a psychologist, and he didn’t really have a social personality to begin with.

If anything, he was quite awkward when it came to relationships. That was why he was mostly observing the situation for now, clumsy as he might be.

I’ll do the best I can... Hopefully things will work out.

He could only do his best with the situation, after all. With that thought, Rio went about setting up the camp.

Later that night, their newest problem occurred shortly after the two of them had settled down to sleep.

“Wah... wah... uwaaaah!”

Inside the pitch black tent they were sleeping in — small and simply constructed to just cram the two of them in — Latifa suddenly burst into tears. Rio’s eyes shot open and he immediately looked towards Latifa, who was laying down next to him. She was crying with her eyes closed beside him. It was the night-time crying of an infant, so to speak. While it varied from person to person, children who cried at night at Latifa’s age were rare. However, Rio couldn’t figure out why she would be crying. She had been fine the day before, after all.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Rio asked her helplessly through her incessant tears.

“Eek! No... Where am I?! Someone save me!” Latifa mumbled in her sleep as tears continued to stream down her face.

“That’s... Japanese...” The words that came forth from Latifa were of a language extremely familiar to Rio — no, Amakawa Haruto. He was utterly dumbfounded. However, Latifa’s eyes remained shut.

“Was that... sleeptalking?”

Rio realized that the words had been involuntarily spoken. But for merely talking while she was asleep, her words were a shocking revelation.

Latifa suddenly clutched the robe Rio was using as a blanket tightly, pulling it closer to cling to him. She had quieted to just sniffing, now, but still showed no sign of stopping her tears.

“What should I do...” Should he wake her up, or should he let her sleep on like this? Not knowing what to do, Rio simply laid there, bewildered.

“Are you awake?” Rio gently tried to shake her.

“Mom... dad... brother,” she murmured timidly in Japanese.

Rio furrowed his brow at the unbearable feeling within him. Was she experiencing some kind of dream? He couldn’t help but imagine what kind of dream it could be.

Warm, gentle days. Living in happiness, every day. Maybe it was a dream like that...

But that dream wouldn’t last long. As though proving his theory, Latifa teared up more and buried her face into Rio’s chest.

Her small frame fit snugly against Rio’s chest, and her white, porcelain-like skin seemed so delicate; fragile enough to break with a single touch...

Rio wrapped an arm around Latifa’s back and patted her gently, as though handling a glass doll. At the same time, he carefully stroked her beautiful, pale orange hair, untangling the knots. Her cute fox ears moved, twitching happily as he did. For a while, Rio continued to soothe Latifa like an older brother calming his crying sister.

“Nngh...”

Eventually, Latifa’s breathing evened out in her sleep. Rio let out a sigh of relief. She was still clinging to his robe, but he didn’t see a need to forcefully

pull away from her, so he let it be.

Suddenly, Rio was overwhelmed by a surge of mental fatigue. They had been running every single day, accumulating exhaustion until it manifested as a sleepiness that gnawed away at his consciousness.

Rio slowly blinked his heavy eyelids shut and let the darkness of sleep take his mind far away.

The next morning, when Latifa woke up, she found herself clinging onto something warm and comforting.

She rubbed her cheek against it in her half-conscious daze, only coming to her senses once she reluctantly drew her cheek away from it. After several blinks, she realized what she had been clinging to, and froze in shock.

There before her was a boy with well-defined features — Rio. He was breathing peacefully as he slept.

How, when, *why* had she been clinging to him? Incoherent questions passed through her head one after another, causing Latifa to fall into a panic.

C-Come to think of it... I... was crying... That wasn't... a dream, was it...?

She took a deep breath in order to try to calm herself as she recalled the events of last night, but she couldn't determine what had been a dream and what had been reality.

However, she was certain that someone had held her and comforted her with their warmth. Considering her situation right now, those events had probably been reality.

Once Latifa had settled on that conclusion, an embarrassment hard to express in words surged forward. Her heart thumped madly. She clutched Rio's robe with both her hands and hesitantly fixed her gaze on Rio once more.

"Fwah..."

Latifa's pale cheeks flushed red in an instant, and she accidentally let out a befuddled sound.

"His hair... so black... He looks... like him? Like that older brother... like an

onii-chan...”

She tilted her head as she looked at him curiously.

“Ehehe. Onii-chan.”

Latifa buried her face against Rio’s chest once more, happily letting a smile appear on her face. Her actions were like that of a small puppy furiously seeking affection.

After taking in Rio’s scent and feel for a while, Latifa slowly raised her head to look up at him.

“Good morning. Sleep well?” Rio greeted her softly, looking back at her with a somewhat troubled face.

“Fweh?! Ah, I... I’m sorry! Wah!” Latifa stuttered her apology, jumping back in a panic and bumping her head against the low roof. Rio rubbed Latifa’s head gently.

“It’s all right, I’m not mad. This place is cramped, so you need to be careful. Are you hurt?”

“I-I’m... fine. Ehe. Eheheh.” Latifa grinned in delight.



Over two months passed since the night Latifa cried in her sleep.

Presently, Rio and Latifa had crossed the Nephilim Mountains and passed through the huge wasteland beyond it, continuously making their way east. With no map, they had to fumble their way through, sometimes taking detours and sometimes retreating backwards. But they were definitely moving forward, little by little.

“Rio! Excuse me, but I can smell something strange! It smells like a beast’s blood!” As the two of them were running across a plateau, Latifa called out. She had lost a lot of her stuttering speech by conversing with Rio in the last two months.

Rio, who was running in front, threw up a hand sign and stopped.

As a werefox, Latifa’s sense of smell was leagues above Rio’s, even when he

enhanced his senses through his physical body enchantment. Her nose was able to identify any scent and process the information accurately. That was why Rio placed his trust in Latifa's sense of smell, requesting that she let him know whenever she smelled something suspicious.

However, yelling it out loudly wasn't the best idea.

"A beast's blood... There might be a carnivorous beast nearby. Which way did the scent—"

Just as Rio was about to ask Latifa for further details, his heightened sense of hearing picked up on the shrill screeches of a reptilian creature.

"What was that just now...?"

"Is something wrong?"

Seeing Rio's sudden perceptive expression made Latifa tilt her head in confusion. After about a ten-second pause, Rio located the origin of the strange sound and looked up at the sky far above them. There was a flight of eerie, black, bird-like creatures.

They tucked in their wings and swooped down at Rio and Latifa. Once they reduced their air resistance to the absolute minimum, they closed the distance between them and Rio in the blink of an eye.

"Is that a bird...?! Latifa, they're coming at us from above!" Rio yelled, prompting Latifa to draw her dagger from her waist. However, she was overwhelmingly short on reach for fighting an enemy that could fly in the air.

Furthermore, Latifa was incapable of any magic other than *Augendae Corporis*, so she didn't have any other effective means of attack. Thus, she could only glare at the flying group as they approached. Her small body trembled just barely.

"It'll be fine. Don't move!" Rio said, manipulating the essence in his body to form two lumps of ice in his hands. Then, he swung his hands and hurled the boulder-like blocks of ice at the flight of bird creatures.

The giant blocks of ice hurtled through the sky like cannonballs, colliding with the creatures as though it was absorbing their bodies, before shattering and

blowing the eerie beasts away.

But the group of creatures itself was still full of life. Without pausing for breath, Rio launched a second round. This knocked two more creatures out of the group in the sky — and one of them landed near Rio and Latifa. Rio took one look at it, before widening his eyes in shock.

A dragon? No, a demi-dragon?! The identity of the bird-like creature that had attacked Rio and Latifa was a demi-dragon — similar to a dragon in appearance and said to be a member of the dragon family. This flight in particular was composed of the smallest subspecies of demi-dragon: the three-meter-long Winged Lizard.

The creature that had fallen before Rio had taken an ice chunk straight to the face, but it was still breathing weakly. They weren't members of the dragon family for nothing — their bodies were ridiculously sturdy.

“Kyaaah!”

Having had four of their group defeated in such a short time, the remaining Winged Lizards became wary, scattering themselves to surround Rio and Latifa. Rio scowled faintly and released a third round of ice blocks. However, the circling flight of the Winged Lizards was much harder to aim at compared to the direct path they had used before.

“R-Rio! They're coming all at once!”

“Yeah, it's not worth the effort of taking them all down. Let's run! Come on!”

Rio kicked off the ground as Latifa did the same behind him. The two of them bolted away like a startled hare, but the Winged Lizards also gave pursuit. Irritatingly, they maintained a distance not too near and not too far as they enclosed around Rio and Latifa.

I guess they won't let us get away that easily, Rio thought, turning to look behind him and frowning. It was difficult to gain a lead on Winged Lizards when they could fly.

“Hah... Hah... Hah...” Their full-speed dash with their baggage had already caused Latifa's breath to come out in rough pants.

They're trying to wear our stamina out, huh? Latifa won't last long running at this speed. The situation will only get worse at this rate. Rio analyzed the situation on the spot before coming to a decision.

"Latifa, you go ahead! Hide behind that hill over there."

"Huh? Ah... B-But!" The sudden order perplexed Latifa; she strongly opposed the idea of it.

"It's fine, just go! It's okay, I can manage this by myself! Got it?!" Rio repeated in a stronger tone, before coming to a stop without waiting for a reply.

For an instant, Latifa's speed fell dramatically. But she was more than painfully aware of how much of a burden she was, so she focused on running even as her face screwed up in shame.

One of the Winged Lizards glided down towards Rio.

"Sorry, but you're not getting past me," Rio muttered, removing his backpack before leaping into the air towards the Winged Lizard. He clutched his longsword in his right hand and thrust it into the body of the creature.

So tough! And heavy!

Despite his astonishment at the sensation in his hand, he pulled his sword back. He grabbed the Winged Lizard's neck and pulled it closer to him, flipping himself onto its back with nimble movements, then using it as a stepping stone to attack another Winged Lizard. The Winged Lizard currently under siege tried to snap at Rio and drive him away, but Rio gathered essence in his arms and enhanced his strength. Then, he swung the sword as they passed each other and felled the neck of the beast.

Immediately, Rio created a blast of wind in his left hand and used the reverse thrust to brake and land on the headless creature's back. That was when a new Winged Lizard tried to snap at Rio. Without batting an eyelash, he fired another blast of wind at the creature he was standing on. His body shot upwards, causing the attacking Winged Lizard's jaws to close around nothing but thin air.

Rio flipped himself around midair and brought his sword down against the extended neck of the Winged Lizard from above. No sooner then he had done that, he stuck his left arm above him and used the reverse thrust to leap onto

the back of the just-beheaded Winged Lizard. Landing on its back, Rio sheathed his sword by his waist and held both hands out to each side, using essence to create large balls of fire. He launched them at two of the Winged Lizards nearby.

The fireballs drew a neat curve in the air as they collided directly with the creatures. A shockwave rang out from the impact, shaking the air around them, but the only damage the Winged Lizards took was having their balance thrown off.

They may have been demi-dragons, but they were still renowned for being vicious creatures — their skin was highly resistant towards heat.

“Krraaah!”

The leader of the Winged Lizards raised its strange voice in protest, responding to what it perceived as a threat — Rio. The flight scattered in every direction and fled.

Meanwhile, the Winged Lizard Rio was standing on was on a collision course with the ground. Just before making contact, Rio directed a blast of wind towards the ground to soften the impact. The force of the wind blew him backwards, raising him into the air. Next, he maximized the enhancement on his physical body before landing a few moments after the Winged Lizard crashed into the ground.



After Latifa managed to escape by herself, she was faced with a threat that was different than the one Rio was tackling.

“Hah... Hah... H-huh?!”

As she hid behind the hill that Rio had pointed out and regained her breath, she suddenly caught the scent of something else. Glancing around nervously, she spotted a Lizardman — another subspecies of demi-dragon like the Winged Lizard. The shadow of death loomed over her; fear clawed away at her heart.

“Eek?! ”

Body trembling, Latifa readied her dagger. For all the assassination experience

she had until now, she had never been on the side of being attacked herself.

The Lizardman was two meters tall and boasted five meters from head to tail — almost like a dinosaur — with its whip-like tail swinging from side to side.

Using the movements ingrained within her body, Latifa leaped instinctively. She flipped once in the air and stabbed at the Lizardman's back with her dagger. However, her physical enchantments weren't enough to make up for her childish strength. The light attack of her dagger only spurred the creature on further.

"Ugh! I-It's so tough?!"

Faced with the fact her dagger could only scratch the surface of its skin, Latifa gasped. When the Lizardman let out an angry roar at the dull pain in its backside, Latifa used its back as a stepping stone to leap away in a panic. Landing in a clearing where the group of beasts hadn't gathered, Latifa poured her strength into her legs to focus on a getaway. However, when she tried to run, she found the Lizardmen had already cut around her in wait.

Overwhelmed at the numbers, Latifa's face twisted with fright.

If she could use her battle abilities to their full capacity, she would have been able to create as many escape routes as she wanted. What Latifa lacked in power, she made up for in speed, after all. As long as she positioned herself correctly, she'd be able to keep them at bay for as long as her stamina could hold up. Then, once she bought enough time, Rio would come back to save her.

But Latifa had lost her nerve from the start, panicking too much to remain calm, not unlike those times when she had been controlled by the Collar of Submission. She'd do anything to avoid a situation where she'd have to fight to the death.

Furthermore, Latifa had almost no experience fighting in anything other than a one-on-one situation.

"Krraaah!" The Lizardman she cut in the back earlier roared, jumping at Latifa.

"No!" she screamed, leaping away from it with more strength than needed. The unexpected turn of events had completely turned her panic into inner chaos.

The Lizardmen seemed to pick up on her fear as they swished their tails tauntingly in a mocking strike against her. Latifa somehow managed to evade the attack with her jump, but the chaos within her only grew stronger. Her movements became slower and slower.

“Kya?!” Eventually, Latifa tripped and fell.

She tried to stand up in a hurry, but her body collapsed beneath her. There was no strength in her arms... Her legs wouldn't move, either.

The Lizardmen halted their animated display of intimidation and slowly walked forward.

“Ugh, ah... N-No... S-Save me... O... Onii...chan...” Latifa squeaked out, on the verge of tears, as her imminent death approached her step-by-step.

Save me... That was all she could think.

In front of her was a large shadow — the drooling mouth and sharp fangs of a Lizardman. It was the same one that Latifa injured earlier; it emitted a delightful screech as it opened its jaws wide.

As she stared up at the evil creature above her in a helpless daze, Rio's face flashed across Latifa's mind. He had saved her after she tried to assassinate him, looked after her, and was somewhat similar to the young man in her other self's memories. A kind, gentle person.

“Onii-chan!”

Before she knew it, Latifa was yelling that name — the name she had always wanted to call, but had never been able to.

Just then, a large boulder came flying from the side, easily blowing away the Lizardman's body and causing the other Lizardmen to stir at the sudden ambush. Latifa jumped to her feet as quickly as possible and turned in the direction the boulder came from. There, in a black robe, stood the boy several years older than her — Rio.

A flicker of hope burned in Latifa's eyes.

In contrast, the Lizardmen, instinctively sensing that they had something to fear, backed away gradually.

Rio held his sword at the ready and released a fierce, intimidating aura. His tawny brown eyes glinted sharply, taking in the Lizardmen observantly, before suddenly springing forth. He moved like the wind, closing the gap between them and placing himself before Latifa instantly. After cutting the neck of the one in front of him, he stomped firmly against the ground. In response, the ground before him warped, shooting up like a spear to attack the Lizardmen.

While he wasn't able to deal effective damage against the thick-skinned demi-dragons, he successfully broke up their formation. Jumping at that chance, he swung his sword to fatally wound them.

"K-Krraaah!"

After reducing a few of their numbers, their leader signaled for their retreat, and the group of Lizardmen all began to withdraw at once.

Watching their retreating figures, Rio let out a small sigh. He slid the longsword in his right hand back into the scabbard at his waist, then made eye contact with Latifa.

"Sorry. The Lizardmen just now were probably in cahoots with the Winged Lizards earlier. Their goal was to split us up."

"...O-Onii-chan!"

Latifa lost all the strength in her body, wailing "onii-chan" loudly as she bawled her eyes out.

Rio had no idea who "onii-chan" referred to, but he slowly approached and knelt before her. Latifa clung to him.

"Onii-chan, I was so scared!"

"Huh? Umm... I'm sorry."

Does she mean me when she says "onii-chan"? Rio hesitated for a moment, before reaching over to pat Latifa's back awkwardly.

"No... Thank you. For saving me." Latifa choked back on her sobs, reaching out to tightly grasp Rio's robes.

"Umm, by the way," Rio began in a slightly tentative voice. Latifa raised her head to peer up at Rio's face.

“You said ‘onii-chan’...”

It took Latifa a few seconds to process the meaning of Rio’s words. Realizing how long she spent gazing at his face in a daze made her blush with embarrassment.

“Err, ah, umm! S-Sorry!”

“No, it’s not something you need to apologize for...” Rio said with a troubled face at Latifa’s panicked apology.

“Huh? Really?!” Latifa’s expression suddenly brightened up.

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I-Is it okay if I call you onii-chan...?”

“E-Eeh...?”

“Or... not... You wouldn’t want that...”

“I don’t mind. But why?”

“I just thought it’d be nice having you as my Onii-chan...” Latifa trailed off towards the end, then glanced up at Rio nervously.

“...I see.”

Rio’s expression conveyed his complicated, hard-to-describe state of mind. He didn’t think he had done anything overly brotherly-like on their journey until now. Knowing they’d part ways eventually, he had kept Latifa at a distance while treating her with a gentle disposition. That was all Rio had intended for in his interactions with her.

But what Latifa thought as she journeyed with him was a different story. Ever since that first night when she cried, she had rapidly started to open her heart towards him. The emotions she had suppressed during her slave days burst forth like a broken dam.

That was understandable — Latifa had been starving. Starving for kindness, for affection, for love... It made sense that the object of her desires would be pointed towards Rio, the one who saved her, in a nearly dependent form.

“Onii-... Rio. I’m sorry,” Latifa apologized, watching for Rio’s reaction fearfully.

Her expression was like a crestfallen puppy that had been abandoned. Rio sighed at that thought.

“Whichever way is fine.”

“Huh?” Latifa’s mouth dropped open as she looked at Rio blankly.

“You can call me whatever you want.” While he knew it was a compliant judgment to make, Rio couldn’t help but tell her that. He had gotten too close to Latifa without even realizing it himself.

“R-Really?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

“Ehehe...” Unable to hold back the giggle that bubbled up within her, Latifa smiled joyfully.

No, there was no need to hold back. It had been so long since she had felt happiness this warm, after all.

Chapter 4: Encounter

Two weeks passed since the day they were attacked by the demi-dragons.

“Onii-chan, what’s for breakfast today?” Latifa inquired about the menu one morning, playing by herself in the compact space of the shelter as Rio lay next to her.

“What do you want to eat, Latifa?” Rio asked with a small, uneasy smile.

“I want to eat *risotto*! The kind with cheese!” she informed him cheerfully. As the name implied, it was the exact same food as the Italian risotto that existed on Earth.

“*Risotto*... that’s made with wheat in a broth, right?”

“Yup, that’s right!”

Rio was aware of what the word *risotto* meant, but he reacted like it was a term he wasn’t too familiar with. This was because he had yet to tell Latifa that he had memories of his previous life on Earth. Latifa was in the same situation as him, but she would yell out the name of the food whenever she recognized something familiar from Earth. Her attachment to Rio had probably lowered her guard enough to do that.

Rio already suspected that Latifa was a Japanese person in her previous life, but he didn’t push the topic, as he didn’t want to cause unnecessary drama for himself.

“All right. Then I’ll make it as soon as possible. You can sleep for a little longer, Latifa,” Rio said, sitting up.

“No, I want to watch you cook, Onii-chan.” Latifa turned her mouth up in a carefree smile and shook her head.

“There’s nothing fun about watching, though.”

“I have fun just being together with Onii-chan, you know?”

“Really, now? Then let’s go.” With a strained smile, Rio left the shelter.

At present, Rio and Latifa were in a hilly area near the center of the Wilderness. They had set up their tent on the top of a small hill last night, giving them a wonderful view of the area. If they looked to the east, grasslands stretching all the way to the horizon filled their vision.

As Rio went about cooking the risotto, he stared just beyond that horizon.

“Hey, Latifa. Are you sure you can’t see that huge tree over there?” he asked Latifa, who was sitting right next to him.

“Hm? The one you mentioned yesterday? I only see the grasslands... why?” Latifa had been watching Rio cook cheerfully, all while keeping aware of their surroundings. At Rio’s prompt, she tilted her head curiously.

“If you can’t see it, that’s fine. Don’t worry.” Rio shook his head with an evasive smile. He glanced once more towards the east, where a humongous tree stood along the horizon, clear as day.

He had first sighted the tree yesterday.

They were making their way eastwards when he saw something fluctuating in the air far away. Feeling suspicious, he had strained his eyes to visualize essence and the air cleared up, revealing a giant tree that pierced the skies.

So it must have some kind of obstruction that only allows it to be perceived through sorcery. It’s detectable if you can visualize essence, but seems to be invisible to anyone else.

Rio figured that was why he could see the tree, while Latifa couldn’t.

The problem is... who cast that sorcery? It’s more than possible that demi-humans did it. According to the literature I read in the Academy library, they’re very compassionate towards their own kind...

Rio recalled the literature he had read during his days at the Academy. Somewhere in the Wilderness, demi-humans — elves, dwarves, and werebeasts — lived together. They had a strong sense of kinship for their own kind. On the other hand, they held deep hatred towards humans that oppressed demi-humans, and chose to live deep within the Wilderness by themselves.

Rio glanced over at Latifa. She noticed his gaze and spoke up.

“Hm? What is it, Onii-chan?”

“...Nothing. It’ll be ready soon. Do you want mushrooms in it?”

“Yes! But no wild grasses, please.”

“I know.” Rio nodded with a smile.

It wasn’t that Latifa couldn’t eat wild grasses, it was just that they were bitter enough to ruin the flavor if they were added to the risotto. Just like that, he kept a track of her preferences in tastes and spoiled her.

At any rate, we’ll have to head to that forest first and see what happens.

Perhaps, in the near future, the time would come where he would have to part ways with Latifa. Ultimately, that would be best for Latifa’s future, as she would be happier living with her own kind — at least, that was what Rio told himself. While he held some reservations about it deep in his chest, that was what he had decided in the end.

“All right, it’s done. We’ll be on the move a lot today, too, so make sure you eat up.”

That day, they left the hilly area and reached the great forest beyond it.

That tree is deep within these woods. I’m not sure how we can possibly find it, but we can only give it a go. Standing at the entrance — although they could have entered from any point, really — Rio looked over the trees in their vicinity and decided to move forward. Next to him, Latifa was watching on nervously.

“Onii-chan, are we really going in here? Won’t we get lost?”

“It’s all right — I know the way. We’ll camp here and enter the forest tomorrow morning,” Rio answered with a faint shadow to his smile.

That seemed to be enough reassurance for Latifa, though, who nodded earnestly. “Okay!”

The next morning, the two stepped into the great forest. The entry of the forest was far behind them after a few minutes of walking.

The densely overgrown flora made everything dark even in the middle of the day, as the sun’s rays were filtered by the canopy of trees above. The ground

was uneven, making it hard to walk on, and it was hard to progress in a straight line. Rio and Latifa used their natural physical abilities to continue along the pathless route easily.

There were trees and plants as far as the eye could see — similar scenery could be seen no matter which way they turned. Normally, one would immediately lose their sense of direction and struggle to find their way out, but Rio didn't hesitate in his footsteps at all. Occasionally, he would climb to the top of a tall tree and double-check their direction, adjusting it as they went. Seeing Rio's reliable figure like that made all of Latifa's anxieties fade away.

Still, they did encounter several wild beasts on the road.

For example, a pack of intelligent and persistent wolves and a four-meter-long tiger-like animal with fangs as sharp as blades made an appearance, but the two travelers were able to drive them away with Rio's power. After progressing for the whole day, their first day of forest exploration ended without occurrence.

The incident occurred on the second day of their forest stay.

"Onii-chan... it's really faint, but I can smell the scent of something unfamiliar around here. Multiple different scents."

In the dark forest, night fell quickly. It was almost time for them to search for a camping spot when Latifa informed Rio, twitching her nose as she did so.

"...And it isn't anything you've smelled until now?"

"Yup! I remember all the scents of the beasts we met since entering the forest. It isn't as strong as the others, so it might not be a beast? But that may be because the scent is weak...? I wonder..." Latifa tilted her head in confusion.

"Then the owner of the scent isn't anywhere nearby, right?"

"Probably. Yeah, I think so."

"Then we'll rest around here for today. We're almost at our destination soon anyway."

"Really? We'll finally be out of the forest!" Latifa grinned happily, whereas Rio smiled with a slightly troubled expression.

That night, the two of them squeezed into their narrow shelter like always,

lying down side by side.

“Onii-chan, can I hold your hand?”

“Sure,” Rio replied, offering his hand in spite of the strained smile on his face.

Once their hands were linked, Latifa was able to get a calm night’s sleep. When she didn’t, she would sometimes start crying in the middle of the night.

“Ehehe. Good night, Onii-chan.” Latifa said, falling asleep not long after.

After he was sure she was asleep, Rio closed his eyes too. As he slowly slipped into the land of sleep, he stretched a part of his awareness around them so that he could react to any abnormalities nearby.

Then, several hours later...

Rio snapped his eyes open.

He looked to his side and saw Latifa in a deep sleep. Gently prying his hand away from her, he removed the makeshift door to their tent entrance and went outside. There was a strange, restless feeling in his chest for some reason, but the forest was pitch black, and there were no signs of other living creatures around. Their surroundings were almost terrifyingly quiet.

Suddenly, a cold wind blew against his skin; today was chillier than usual. He started a campfire near the entrance of the shelter so that Latifa wouldn’t catch a cold.

“Onii-chan...?” Latifa’s nervous voice could be heard from inside the tent.

“I’m right here. Go to sleep.”

Rio stroked Latifa’s head and spoke gently to her. To give her a peaceful rest without crying during the night, he manipulated his essence to imitate sleep magic.

With a weary sigh, Rio looked up at the sky. He couldn’t see that far, even with the campfire and his night-adjusted vision, but he could spy a sky full of stars through the gaps of the trees.

With his sleepiness completely faded, Rio warmed himself up by the campfire and boiled some water to drink. The flames flickered, illuminating his face. As

he prodded the dying embers with a stick, a soft wind brushed gently against his body.

Hm? Rio turned in the direction the wind blew from.

There stood a single silver wolf; it was huge — easily several meters from head to tail.

Just when did it get so close?!

Rio grit his teeth, then jumped to his feet, drawing his sword from its scabbard. The silver wolf in front of him showed absolutely no signs of the ferocity expected from a beast; its presence was incredibly weak. Despite its wolf shape, there was something unnatural about it — almost like it didn't exist.

Rio fixed his eyes on the silver wolf, unwilling to let it out of his sights. It felt like the moment he let his eyes drift, the wolf would disperse into nothing.

Suddenly, the silver wolf began to glow; a torrent of light spread throughout its surroundings. White flooded Rio's vision, making him shut his eyes involuntarily.

Oh, no... it's got my sight — just as that thought passed through his mind, Rio felt multiple presences appear around him, one after another.

They were hiding! Are they demi-humans?! How did they know we were here?

Despite his surprise, Rio calmly analyzed his current situation. But even as he was doing that, the demi-human group continued to approach.

Time was up — he didn't have any more time to think.

Rio lightly stomped on the ground, flooding essence into the surrounding dirt. The dirt around the shelter rose out of the ground, forming a wall where Latifa was sleeping. He could tell the attackers were slightly confused by the way they stirred in response, but they weren't naive enough to let their guard down just like that.

Rio's vision had yet to recover, but he could tell they had completely surrounded him. He sensed that one of them was rapidly approaching him, which prompted him to dodge by jumping to the side. As soon as he proved that he could respond to the surprise attack even while blinded, the air around

the attackers intensified at once.

Rio raised his defenses even more.

He might have managed to evade the first attack, but his vision was still blurry, and he didn't have a read on the opponent's strength — anyone could tell that this situation was bad. His only saving grace was the fact that they were aiming to capture him alive... probably. After all, there were countless other ways they could have approached him if they intended on killing him.

Which meant that negotiation *should* be possible.

With that in mind, Rio opened his mouth — but the first presence who had attacked him clicked their tongue impatiently and launched a second attack.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Rio called out in a rush, but his opponent showed no sign of stopping. Left with no other choice, Rio prepared to activate another magic-mimicking abnormal ability, keeping the intensity of the situation in check.

It wasn't an offensive technique: it was an imitation of *Zona Revelare* magic that allowed him to pour his essence into his surroundings and detect reacting essence, much like a sonar. His true aim was to use it as a temporary substitute for his lost vision. He'd be able to detect the numbers and positions of his opponents.

“Uzuma, stand back! This guy is using some kind of spirit art!”

A girl standing on the edge of the circle surrounding Rio — who appeared to be the same age as him, with long silver-blond hair and wolf ears poking out of her head — shouted in a language Rio didn't understand. In response to the first girl's voice, the girl named Uzuma — who appeared to be in her mid-twenties and sprouted beautiful bird wings from her back — froze in her approach.

“It's all right... it's just a spirit art that detects nearby ode!” Another girl in the circle — also similar in age to Rio but with magnificently long, emerald-gold hair and somewhat rounded elf ears — immediately chimed in.

“He shouldn't be able to see yet, but it would be wise to assume he knows our numbers and positions now. Good grief...” a short girl standing next to the elf

murmured with a sigh. She looked to be a bit younger than Rio, with fiery, short, red hair, and dwarf ears similar in shape to those of the other girl's.

I don't know what they're saying, but the atmosphere's changed slightly. This is my chance.

Having made that judgment, Rio took the opportunity to start a conversation with the intention of buying time.

"Wait, please! Are you people demi-humans? If so, I wish to speak with you."

Everyone present frowned in reaction to the word "demi-humans."

"Lady Sara, humans are vile plunderers. He may look like a child, but he had the skill to make it this deep into this territory. He must certainly be up to no good," Uzuma advised in a strict tone, looking towards the silver werewolf girl named Sara.

"...I know. However, we need to know what his goal is," Sara said, furrowing her brow uneasily.

"In that case, we should assume the worst and immediately restrain him. He can explain his story after that. We already have reason to believe he has kidnapped one of our own, after all," Uzuma stubbornly insisted.

"...Orphia, are there any essence reactions other than us in the area?" After considering Uzuma's words, Sara looked at the elf girl named Orphia.

"Yes, one within that dirt wall. It's not moving, so it could be a magic artifact."

"But if it's one of our own, there's the possibility he may use them as a hostage," Uzuma said coldly in response to Orphia's words. Sara and the others grimaced faintly, increasing the tension of the situation.



Meanwhile...

I don't know what they're saying, but it doesn't seem like we'll be able to communicate. Should I tell them about Latifa immediately? No... it'd be a problem if there was speciesism between demi-humans. At worse, they could turn this place into a battlefield. I should just wait for my vision to recover...

Completely left out of their conversation, Rio passively observed them without interrupting. If he proactively disclosed information to them, there was the possibility they'd accept her into their protection immediately — but that was just his wishful thinking.

Latifa was born between a human and werebeast, so there was the possibility she would be discriminated against, and she could be treated as an enemy by other demi-humans for being a werefox, too.

With Rio not in the best of conditions, he had no choice but to go with the safer plan. Because of that, his vision was gradually recovering, and he could see much clearer than before.

During that time, Sara and the others finished their conversation.

"Then as our representative, I shall approach and distract him with conversation. Orphia, could you ask Ariel to search inside the dirt wall? Alma will support you. If one of our own is within, we must save them no matter what."

"You got it, Sara!"

"Understood, Miss Sara."

The elf girl named Orphia and dwarf girl named Alma each nodded in response to Sara's orders.

"Uzuma, you make the necessary preparations to restrain that boy at a moment's notice."

"Understood," Uzuma acknowledged Sara's order eagerly.

After they laid out the simple plan of action, Sara carefully approached Rio.

"...I shall accept your request to speak. However, I ask that you do not refer to us by the slur 'demi-humans,'" Sara said in a slightly accented tone, using the

common language of the Strahl region.

“Thank you very much for accepting my request. With regard to using that name, I sincerely apologize for my unintended rudeness. However, there is no word in the language of Strahl that can be used in the stead of the generic term for your people... I would have to refer to you separately as elf, dwarf, and werebeast. Thus, if it’s not too much trouble, could you please inform me of the individual species of everyone here?”

Rio offered words of gratitude and apology in a respectful tone, including a question to gather more information, too.

“...I am a silver wolf werebeast, and our group here consists of many species including, elves and dwarves. When referring to us as a group, please call us spirit folk,” Sara explained.

“I see. Thank you for clarifying that for me.”

Hearing they consisted of many species made Rio chuckle to himself. That lowered the possibility of speciesism amongst demi-humans considerably. All he had left to worry about was the human blood that flowed through Latifa.

“Sara, there’s a werebeast child in here! She was made to sleep through spirit arts!” The elf named Orphia yelled loudly, once again using the language Rio didn’t understand.

Uzuma, who had been next to Rio and ready to jump and restrain him at a moment’s notice, swelled with anger immediately. She leaped at Rio from the side, and drove her fist into his abdomen without holding back. Since he didn’t expect their conversation to be interrupted by an attack, Rio’s reaction was delayed. He absorbed the punch by jumping back, but he wasn’t able to completely defend against it. He hovered there after being blown several meters into the air, then landed on the ground and rolled away.

“Uzuma, I didn’t order anything yet! You’ve gone too far! My command was to restrain him. Were you trying to kill him?!” Sara scolded Uzuma for acting brashly.

“His true strength was unknown, and he had enhanced his physical body with spirit arts. That’s why I merely took the safest route. I may have knocked him

out, but there's no danger to his I—"

"Watch out, he's using some kind of spirit art!" Alma — who was the dwarf of the group — yelled in the middle of Uzuma's explanation.

"What?!" Uzuma reacted swiftly, looking in Rio's direction. Rio was stumbling to his feet with a hand pressed against his stomach. A nasty sheen of sweat had broken out on his forehead.

"It's a healing spirit art."

"Tch, I'll knock him out!"

Once Orphia accurately guessed the spirit art Rio was using, Uzuma rushed at Rio once more. In her hand, she grasped a short spear.

"Hey, wait a minute! What's the meaning of this?! Kuh!" Rio yelled as he drew his sword and stopped Uzuma's attack. A sharp pain shot through his stomach, making his face twist.

"I apologize for attacking out of the blue. However, we have confirmed that one of our kind is within that dirt wall. Because we suspect you of kidnapping one of our own, I will now proceed to restrain you for interrogation purposes. Please refrain from resisting!" Sara explained with a bitter expression, almost as though this wasn't her true intention.

"This is a misunderstanding! That child is under my care—"

"No one would believe the words of a human, much less those of a kidnapper. Give it up!"

Even as Sara and Rio conversed, Uzuma didn't let up on her attacks. She continued to swing her spear, overwhelming him. On the other hand, having suffered a lot of damage to his abdomen, and having yet to completely recover his vision, Rio's movements were becoming rather sluggish. It was the worst possible situation.

"I didn't kidnap that girl... Just listen to what I have to say! ...W-What?!"

After narrowly dealing with Uzuma's attack, Rio's feet were caught by something that had him come to a complete standstill. When he looked down, he could see the vague shape of dirt sticking out of the ground, unnaturally

restraining his feet.

“Tch, your help was unnecessary.”

Uzuma muttered something, glancing at one of the spirit folk in the circle behind her unhappily. The older dwarf woman was kneeling with her hands pressed against the ground. Uzuma spun the spear in her hands before launching a single blow at Rio with all her might. Rio received the attack straight on.

What ridiculous strength! The impact was stronger than anything he had ever felt until now, sending the sword clutched in his hands flying away.

“Gah...!” Rio felt a sharp, agonizing pain run through his entire body like lightning. Uzuma had placed her hand against his body and released a high voltage current of electricity. With his body paralyzed, Rio’s vision soon darkened as he collapsed onto the ground. The last thing he saw was Orphia’s panicked figure running towards him, and the stern glares of the spirit folk looking down on him.

Chapter 5: Misunderstanding

Sara and the other spirit folk brought the unconscious Rio and Latifa back to their village with them. Rio was restrained with a magic artifact and escorted to the rarely used jail cell in the village town hall, while Sara’s group carried Latifa to a guest room within the same building.

A werefox elder waited for them in the room to receive their report of the incident. As the representative of their group, Sara explained the circumstances to the elder first.

“...Hmm. Don’t you think you were a little too rough, dear Uzuma?” The elder looked at Uzuma coldly after hearing the report.

“B-But it was an emergency situation...”

“Well, that may be true... however, this child... I have never seen her around here before. And I’d definitely remember a child this cute.”

“Yes. In regards to that, we discovered supplies in their camp that we believe to be travel equipment belonging to this girl. It’s possible that she isn’t one of the villagers...” Sara clarified from the side with a slightly pale face.

“Orphia. Alma. Bring the captured boy here immediately.” The expression on the elder’s face changed instantly, and she gave her order in a somewhat cold tone.

Orphia and Alma both stutteringly agreed to the elder and hurried out of the room.

Latifa opened her eyes soon after.



Latifa opened her eyes to find herself in an unfamiliar room. She was on a soft and comfy bed, under a warm and snug blanket. Compared to camping outside, it was far, far more comfortable and pleasant to sleep on. And yet —

“...Onii-chan?” Latifa murmured, glancing wildly around the room.

Her precious person wasn't here, where he should be. Instead, she was surrounded by strangers: the silver werewolf Sara, the winged werebeast Uzuma, and the werefox — like Latifa — elder. The three of them sat on chairs facing each other, conversing with conflicted expressions on their faces that immediately halted when they noticed that Latifa was awake.

"Hmm, seems like you're awake now. Good morning, brethren of mine. How do you feel?" The werefox elder smiled, speaking in the language of the spirit folk. However, Latifa couldn't understand a single word.

"...What are you saying? Onii-chan... Where's Onii-chan?" She tilted her head and spoke in the common language of the Strahl region. A downcast look fell over Sara's and the elder's faces.

"Human language. Elder Ursula, this girl really..."

"So it seems. This child isn't from the village," Sara and the elder said to each other conclusively.

Latifa, on the other hand, couldn't understand what the two were saying, and warily looked around the room. She twitched her nose, secretly sniffing out Rio's scent to locate him.

Suddenly, Latifa's nose caught onto his faint scent.

There's no mistaking it. It's Onii-chan — unable to bear it any longer, Latifa jumped out of the bed and broke into a run.

"Ah, hey! Stop right there!" The sudden turn of events delayed Sara's reaction, allowing Latifa to give her the slip and dip into the hallway.

"Augendae Corporis!"

After successfully making it to the hallway, she chanted the only magic spell she could use. Her body instantly became lighter, strength flowing through her as she ran in the direction of Rio's scent. Sara and Uzuma chased after her.

"Humm. This seems to be taking a turn for the worse," Ursula muttered to herself, her expression darkening.



Several moments earlier, before Latifa opened her eyes...

Rio regained consciousness on a shabby bed in an unfamiliar room. With a fuzzy head, he wondered where he was; his body felt sluggish, as if he had caught a cold. In an attempt to assess the situation, he moved to sit up in the bed, when a sharp pain suddenly stabbed through his stomach area.

Accepting his defeat, he gave up and flopped back down.

He moved his hand to his stomach in order to treat himself with magic, when he realized there were shackles restraining his hands.

These are... Enchanted Sealing Cuffs, huh. They were even careful enough to bind my neck and feet, too.

Rio ground his teeth. Enchanted Sealing Cuffs were an artifact that could contain the magic essence of the wearer. Normally, it was enough to attach just one, but they could be broken depending on the capability of the wearer. Because of this, high-class sorcerers would be made to wear multiple cuffs.

Even managing my essence is too difficult, much less healing myself. Damn it...

Rio frowned as he gazed up at the ceiling above him. Dim moonlight and a cold breeze entered from the iron barred window in the corner of the room. At some point, they had stripped him of his equipment and clothes; Rio was only clothed in a thin underlayer. The temperature of the room was less than ten degrees... He was almost guaranteed to catch a cold like this.

He would have preferred to move around a bit and warm himself as much as possible, but now wasn't the time for that. Rio endured the stabbing pains in his stomach and focused on recovering naturally.

Then, a short while later...

The chill against his skin had already passed his limits, making an unpleasant feeling shoot through him. Eventually, his mind started to nod off into the darkness. He knew it was bad to sleep, but he couldn't find the strength to keep his eyes open.

Then, several minutes after Rio completely lost consciousness, he found himself in a pure white space. He had no idea where he was, nor what was happening.

“Haruto...” A clear, beautiful voice resounded.

Rio looked around in surprise. Before he realized it, an unknown girl stood before him.

Her long rose-gold hair fluttered behind her as she stared at Rio’s face with eyes like rubies. There was no emotion in her expression, but her features were unbelievably refined.

“You’re...” Rio murmured.

He felt like he had seen her face somewhere, but would he really forget the face of someone so overwhelmingly beautiful, a face that emitted such a divine aura?

“Who are you?”

“Me? Who am I... I wonder.” The girl tilted her head to the side.

“You don’t know?” Rio asked.

“Yeah...” the girl nodded sadly.

“But you know who I am, right?”

“Haruto? Haruto... Haruto is... just Haruto.”

“That’s not much of an answer. Okay, then *why* do you know me?”

Her somewhat philosophical yet redundant answer made Rio give a strained smile and change his line of questioning. She reached up to touch Rio’s cheek gently and, after a beat, squeezed his hand. It felt so natural for her to be doing so... Rio simply stood there and held his hand out as she wanted. Her hand felt so unreal, it was almost artificially drained of life — yet at the same time, it was strangely warm.

“I am... connected to Haruto.”

“Connected to me?” Rio didn’t really understand what she was saying.

“Yup. But now is not the time... Haruto, I only belong to you, and I will always be by your side. Your weaknesses, your strengths, your everything — I accept them all. So don’t give up. Don’t be afraid. And believe in yourself a little.”

“W... Why...?”

A dumbfounded expression overcame Rio's face; he was just barely able to find his voice. The girl smiled as though she had regained some of her lost emotion.

"Because you're the only one left for me... for... for what?" she said, blinking with a somewhat confused and mystified expression. Then, the girl widened her eyes with a gasp as her figure suddenly started to fade away.

"...Sorry. It looks like... time's up."

"Time?" Rio asked the girl, but she didn't answer him.

"Sorry. I can only... do this much... for you. Sweet... dreams..."

She hugged Rio softly. Her eyes sluggishly struggled to stay open, as though her consciousness was fading away. Rio, too, followed her into that darkness soon after.

Then, not long after, another voice —

"Haru-kun."

He thought he heard a familiar voice. A girl. Rio knew this girl's voice... No, *Amakawa Haruto* knew this girl's voice. The memories he had desperately tried to seal so long ago came rushing back to him clearly, as though they had happened just yesterday.

"Wake up, Haru-kun!"

Haruto's childhood friend — Ayase Miharuru — was shaking his shoulder.

"...I'm awake."

"Ah! Haru-kun's up!"

Haruto blinked his eyes open against the dazzling light to see Miharuru beaming at him. Miharuru's smile... Just seeing it made Haruto happy, filling his heart with warmth.

"What's up...? I was sleeping so nicely too."

He glanced at the clock. It was still early in the morning.

"Don't give me that! Today's the day of the excursion! You have to get up early!"

Excursion? Why are we going on excursions at this age? Wait, that's right! Today was the first excursion of first grade — Haruto widened his eyes with a gasp as he remembered that. But after a few moments hesitation...

“Hmm. Good night, Mii-chan,” Haruto said, burrowing back into his blankets, despite being more than awake now.

He was really looking forward to the excursion — that was why he hadn't been able to sleep the night before. But for some reason, he really wanted to spend the day with just Miharuru. However, she had been really looking forward to the excursion, so she whined like a child whose precious item was being taken from her.

“Y-You can't do that! We agreed to sit next to each other on the bus and go together!”

Oh, that kind of sounds tempting too, Haruto thought at Miharuru's words, but he made no move to leave the blankets. Wanting to see her reaction, he couldn't help but tease her a little.

“Come on, Haru-kun, get up. Pretty please?” Miharuru shook Haruto gently.

“Mmph...” Haruto grumbled in response. Then, somewhere next to the bed, Miharuru began fidgeting with something.

I guess I should get up now, Haruto thought, but just as he did —

“Geez! I'll definitely get you up!” Miharuru said, jumping on top of his blankets.

“Whoa, huh?! Wait! Hold it, Mii-chan! I surrender! I'll get up!”

Haruto resurfaced from his blankets in a hurry to find Miharuru smiling smugly down at him.

“Fufu! Good morning, Haru-kun.”

Honestly, that cuteness was unfair... But Haruto wasn't about to take it lying down, either.

“There!” Haruto mischievously dragged Miharuru into the blankets with him.

“W-Wah! Haru-kun!” Miharuru blushed furiously at being hugged so tightly by him under the blankets.

“Do you want me to let go?” Haruto asked cheekily. Miharu was in front of him. That was enough to make him very happy.

“Uugh... What’s wrong, Haru-kun? You’re awfully bold today.”

“It’s because I love Mii-chan. Well? Do you want me to let go?”

He really was being bold today, Haruto thought impassively as he spoke.

“Y-You’re being mean, Haru-kun. There’s no way I want you to let go.” Miharu flushed an even deeper scarlet as she mumbled.

“Really. ...Then is it okay if we stay like this a little longer?”

Just for now, at least, Haruto thought as he hugged Miharu.

For an instant, it felt as though Miharu would drift somewhere far away... Haruto continued to pester Miharu to distract himself from his worries.

“Yeah,” Miharu nodded with a small smile.

Haruto gently brushed away strands of Miharu’s hair, then gently stroked her cheek.

...But his hands suddenly refused to move, as though they had been restrained by something.

Before he knew it, Miharu’s warmth disappeared.

“Please get up.”

Haruto — no, Rio — returned to reality, summoned awake by someone’s voice. It was an unfamiliar voice; one of a young girl, but definitely not Miharu’s.

Let me stay asleep, I want to see this dream a little longer... Rio deeply wished for that from the bottom of his heart. However, his consciousness wouldn’t allow that now that he was awake.

“Um, please get up.”

Rio was shaken awake with a blink. Then, his expression immediately changed into one of devastation. Of course, it wasn’t Miharu before him — it was the elf girl Orphia and the dwarf girl Alma.

Was it... a dream? Rio thought hazily through his burning fever and fatigue.

An indescribable feeling of loss overcame him, making tears fall suddenly from his eyes.

Amakawa Haruto was dead, and he would never meet Miharuru again. That was why he did his best to stop remembering Miharuru. The thoughts and feelings he had sealed until now flowed out of him alongside his tears.

Rio still had regretful feelings towards Miharuru inside him; his dream just now had emphasized that keenly. However, even with that awareness, Miharuru did not exist in this world.

Reality was cruel.

“Erm... Good morning.” Orphia said hesitantly as Rio sadly shed his tears.

“Good... morning,” Rio responded on reflex, despite not seeing Orphia and Alma at all. He bit down on his lip in an attempt to stifle his emotions.

Suddenly, he felt someone wrap a blanket over his body. They probably couldn’t bear seeing a similar-aged boy in his underwear, even one of a different race. *Well, who cares about that,* Rio thought offhandedly.

An awkward silence fell over the room — over Orphia and Alma, to be precise. That was when the door flew open with a bang.

“Onii-chan!”

Latifa appeared in the doorway. A few moments later, Sara and Uzuma entered, too. As soon as Latifa entered the room, she burst into tears and clung onto Rio’s horizontal form in the bed.

“...Why are you crying, Latifa?”

“Because you were gone, Onii-chan. I don’t want that... Please don’t leave me. Stay by my side, please?”

“I’m right here, aren’t I?” Rio said gently with a strained smile. Seeing Latifa cry had somehow made him calm down instantly; his emotional disposition had disappeared.

“Then will you always be with me? You’ll never leave, right?” Latifa asked,

squeezing Rio's body even tighter.

"Oh, dear. Could you hug me a little softer? It hurts," Rio said with a troubled face, evading the question.

He couldn't answer yes. If he did, it would probably be a lie. It felt somewhat shameful to lie directly to the face of a young girl who admired him.

"Huh, you're hurt? Why — What's this?!" Latifa finally noticed the cuffs around Rio's hands and feet. She tried to pry them open by force, but it was futile.

"Don't worry about me. Did they do anything bad to you, Latifa?"

"Yes. They hurt my Onii-chan," Latifa answered immediately, making Rio blink with a blank expression.

"Then everything's okay." He said, amused.

"Nuh-uh! That's not true. Who did this to you?"

Latifa shook her head furiously with tears in her eyes. Then, she looked around the room and spotted Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Uzuma — the four who seemed to be in the know. She glared at them suspiciously, silently demanding them to explain what happened.

"U-Umm..."

Unsure of where to begin, Sara's face paled as she opened her mouth. The other three wore similar expressions. Suddenly —

"Good grief, why can't you all walk a little slower? I'm here now."

Belatedly, Ursula arrived. Once she saw Latifa clinging to Rio, she bowed her head and sighed. "Figures. Human boy, please accept my apologies. I'd like to ask you some questions about that girl. Would you kindly cooperate with us? We'll pick a better place to talk, of course."

"Who cares about that! Are you the ones who did this to Onii-chan? Answer me." Before Rio could respond to Ursula's question, Latifa cut in and made a blatantly hostile demand.

"That's right... hm?! This is... quite a fierce killing intent."

The moment Ursula confirmed Latifa's accusation, Latifa took on a protective stance over Rio. Her eyes were as sharp as a guard dog's, glaring at the occupants of the room.

"You were mean to Onii-chan. I won't forgive you."

Before they knew it, a thick intimidating air swept through the dim room. It was directed towards everyone in the room. Everyone except Rio, that is. Sara's group all stiffened at once, sweating nervously. The winged werebeast, Uzuma, stepped forth and took on the full effect of Latifa's skin-piercing gaze.

"Stop it, Uzuma."

"You too, Latifa. I'm glad you feel that way, but stop. I'm fine, so let's listen to what they have to say."

Ursula and Rio intervened, not wanting the situation to get out of hand.

"If Onii-chan says so, then..." Latifa reluctantly backed down.

"Thank you both. Before we relocate, allow me to undo those cuffs. Where is the key, Uzuma?"

"...I gave it to Lady Sara," Uzuma answered Ursula in a stilted voice.

"Then, Sara. Undo those cuffs immediately."

"Y-Yes, ma'am! ...Excuse me." Sara nodded, running towards Rio in a hurry. The cuffs around his neck, hands, and feet were unshackled one by one.

"Thank you very much."

"N-No! We're the ones that should be apologizing to you! Please accept our sincerest apologies!" Sara bowed her head in a fluster after Rio had thanked her.

"Then let us relocate immediately. Follow me."

"Of course. ...But could you give me a moment first? I'd like to heal myself a little."

Just as Rio tried to stand up and follow Ursula, a sharp pain stabbed him in the stomach. His face twisted in agony as he sought permission to treat himself.

"Hm? Did they injure you? That is inexcusable. Let me treat you immediately."

Ursula replied, shooting a cold glance towards Sara and the others.

“No, I can do it. Please do not trouble yourself.” Rio rejected her offer and began to heal himself.

“That’s... spirit art. I see, so you are a human of Yagumo. How unusual...”

“So this is spirit art after all?” Ursula muttered to herself in understanding, prompting Rio to question her.

He was more than well aware that he was using an unusual ability that was similar to, yet unlike magic. He had tried to research the identity of it in the Royal Academy’s library, and as a result, he had discovered a book that spoke of an imitative technique called “spirit art.” However, it held no details other than the name, and his research ended without him receiving any more clarity of his ability.

“From the looks of it, you don’t seem to understand spirit arts very well. How did you come to learn it?”

“I was suddenly able to use it one day.”

“...What?”

Rio’s frank truth made Ursula’s eyes widen.

“Is that unusual?”

“Hum. Humans have far less aptitude towards spirit arts than the spirit folk to begin with... To learn it in a single day *should* be impossible. Under normal circumstances, at least. Don’t tell me...” Ursula said, before giving Rio a meaningful look.

“Is there a problem?”

“No, it’s not a problem... it shouldn’t be, anyway. I’d like to hear more about that too, if possible. I promise to answer any questions you have about us as well.”

“Please do. Also, I would appreciate it if you could lend me something to wear,” Rio said, flashing a glimpse of his underwear-clad figure under the blanket. Ursula sighed deeply.

“...I apologize again. They shall be brought to you immediately. Along with some medicine, since you may already be sick. Orphia, Alma. Go prepare them, now.”

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

Orphia and Alma nodded in unison and hurried out of the room.



After Rio changed, relocated rooms, and introduced himself, he explained the reason he had taken in Latifa. He explained that he had been moving from Strahl to Yagumo, that he was attacked on the way by Latifa, a slave being controlled by the Collar of Submission, and that Latifa decided to follow him after he released her, and so on.

Latifa — the only one who could attest to the truth of his story — had perhaps grown tired or bored of the small talk, as she had fallen asleep on Rio’s lap as he talked. However, her attachment to Rio was the greatest proof they could have offered.

As their discussion progressed, Rio explained the reason why he decided to step foot into the great forest that held the spirit folk’s village. Namely, the fact that he wanted the spirit folk to take the werebeast — Latifa — in, and protect her.

“Uzuma. Because of your hasty actions, you have committed the greatest dishonor upon a benefactor seeking to protect one of our own. Do you have something to say for yourself?”

After hearing the entire story, Ursula turned to Uzuma with a severe look.

“Umm... When I heard that Miss Latifa was put to sleep by spirit arts, I thought that human... that he had surely kidnapped her, and flew into a rage.”

Uzuma explained her side of the story with a flushed face, sweating profusely.

“From what I have heard, you attacked him while in the middle of negotiations without even bothering to hear what Lord Rio had to say. Why did you not wait until he had finished speaking?”

“I-I was simply too enraged... And as long as there was the possibility of a

kidnapping, I had to prepare for the worst case scenario and secure the safe rescue of Miss Latifa...” Uzuma cowered as she spoke, shrinking back in fear.

Considering how urgent the situation had been, Uzuma’s actions couldn’t be written off completely. Anyone would jump to the conclusion of kidnapping if they encountered an armed foreigner, trespassing in their territory, with a young girl of their own species put to sleep by spirit arts.

On top of that, there was the danger of Latifa being used as a hostage if they moved too slowly... And if Rio had really been a kidnapper, that would have been more than possible.

But just because Uzuma’s reaction wasn’t completely wrong didn’t mean that she had done the right thing. Reality didn’t have clear solutions like numerical formulas, after all.

“P-Please forgive me, Head Elder! Y-You may punish me however you see fit, if need be!” Unable to withstand the mood in the room and her own sense of guilt, Uzuma finally cracked and turned to apologizing.

“Hmph. Don’t you think you’ve mistaken who your apology should be directed to?”

“L-Lord Rio! I’m truly very sorry...”

Uzuma suddenly kneeled on the ground, throwing her forehead to the floor before her.

In other words, a *dogeza*.

So the spirit folk also had the culture of *dogeza*... Rio’s eyes widened slightly at that.

While he wasn’t sure whether her action held the same weight as the *dogeza* did in Japan, her apologetic intentions were evident.

“P-Please accept my apology too. My Lord Rio, I am very sorry for what happened!” Following Uzuma’s lead, Sara, Orphia, and Alma all kneeled down in succession.

“...I would be lying if I said I wasn’t bothered, but I accept your apology. I may have lacked some consideration myself when I stepped into your territory so

thoughtlessly.” Uncomfortable with having girls his age and older groveling at his feet, Rio decided to accept their apologies and be done with it. It wouldn’t be a good idea to ruin their relationship from now on, either.

“Lord Rio, please accept an apology from me as well. I promise to have Uzuma take responsibility for her hastiness. The girls over there shall face a scolding from me, too,” Ursula said, making Sara and the others flinch.

“Yes, I understand. So please, everyone, raise your heads. I will be distraught if you remain like this any longer,” Rio said with a forced smile at Sara and the others who were still bowing on the floor.

“Lord Rio. The village elders will gather tomorrow morning and offer you a formal apology. You must be tired tonight. Please rest with Miss Latifa here in this room,” Ursula suggested with a sidelong glance at the girls slowly rising to their feet.

“Then I shall do just that.”

“Good. I shall prepare an attendant for you too. Don’t hesitate to inform us if you need anything.”

“No, nothing. Thank you for your consideration.”

“Of course. Now, I must make some various arrangements, so please excuse me. Come along, you lot.” The girls all followed Ursula out of the room.

On their way out, Uzuma and the three girls bowed deeply, prompting Rio to lightly nod his head at them. Just before she left the room, Ursula sent Latifa a look overflowing with affection. Then, Rio shifted Latifa from his lap onto the bed, before laying down next to her.



Shortly after Rio fell asleep...

The village elders gathered in a council room on the top floor of their town hall.

“...And that’s the general summary of this incident. I believe it would be proper to offer Lord Rio a formal apology and a reward to show our gratitude for saving Miss Latifa and protecting her. Are there any objections?” After

Ursula explained the events that occurred, she looked around the room of elders from where she sat. There were two other elders in the room as well, seated to her left. The others all wore conflicted expressions.

“I don’t believe anyone would object to the apology and reward. But, as we have no knowledge of how human culture works, our common practices may not be conveyed as intended. What we should apologize for and thank him with is another matter that needs considering,” the elf head elder — an elderly man seated at the center of the three seats with Ursula — said.

As they were all different species from humans entirely, there was a significant difference in their fundamental sense of values. In reality, that difference in value was what caused them to separate themselves from humans over the course of history. That was why they wished to avoid expressing their gratitude in the wrong way and causing some kind of displeasure.

“Then why don’t we just ask the kid himself? We can just give him whatever he wants, so long as it’s within our means,” the dwarf head elder suggested from where he sat just to the right.

“Don’t you think that would be rather presumptuous, Dominic?” said the elf male. He looked at the dwarf — Dominic — beside him.

What Dominic had meant was to issue a blank check for Rio to write his desired amount. But if it was an amount they couldn’t afford, they’d be in trouble by appearing even ruder and ungrateful towards him.

The room buzzed.

“Even so, we cannot simply express our gratitude with only words. We owe that much to Lord Rio for how we have slighted him. I believe there is some appeal to Dominic’s words, everyone,” Ursula said, looking at the other elders.

The elf elder gave a stately nod. “Well... I suppose.”

The other elders in the room reluctantly voiced their agreement too. Everyone present admittedly felt it was right to repay Rio in some form or another, but the reason why they were so wary of him was largely due to their preconceptions of humans.

With problems between their species deep-rooted in their history, this was

one thing that couldn't be helped.

"Yep... gotta avoid humans at all costs. I get why everyone feels wary and all, but this one was nice enough to save one of our brethren from slavery and guide her all the way to us from the Strahl region. From what I've heard, we returned his favor with bad blood. He certainly doesn't seem like the type of brat to demand that we offer him a slave... Ain't that right, Ursula?"

"Indeed, I can guarantee that much. He was a compassionate and reasonable boy," Ursula declared assertively at Dominic's question.

"So how about it, Syldora?"

"...All right. Does anyone have any objections?" The elf elder Syldora nodded and looked over the other elders, but no one stepped forward, and the proposal was approved.

"Then to show our gratitude, we shall go with the idea Dominic suggested. Does anyone else have any other points to raise?"

"Hmm. Then may I?" Ursula raised a hand.

"Of course. You were the one most involved with this incident out of the council of elders," Syldora welcomed her with a nod.

"I would like to address the topic of Miss Latifa. While I'm not entirely certain, I believe her upbringing as a slave has resulted in what I perceived as mental fragility. That fragility has manifested itself in the form of dependence towards Lord Rio. If we were to accept her within our community, we would require Lord Rio to stay in the village too — at least until she settles down, I am thinking."

"Ah... In that case, preparations need to be made for lodgings and a caretaker. We also gotta explain the situation to the villagers... and get the brat's consent, too, of course."

Dominic scratched his head at Ursula's words; Syldora and Ursula opened their mouths without missing a beat.

"We can leave the caretaking to the apprentice shrine maidens. Fortunately, they've already met him. It can act as their repentance for troubling one such

protector.”

“Hm. In regards to lodging, there’s an empty house on my property. They can live there. I volunteer to take on the role of being their guardian in the meantime.”

And so, the discussion proceeded smoothly, until...

“Hey. Do you have a moment?”

A beautiful voice echoed clearly throughout the council room. Suddenly, a woman materialized in a spot that had been vacant. She was a young beauty, and was wearing a dress decorated with delicate flowers. Her green hair was long enough to reach the floor, and her eyes were a sparkling emerald color. Her face was so exquisitely refined, it almost seemed devoid of life, yet she also emitted a warm aura about her.

“Y-Your Greatness...”

As soon as they caught sight of her, all the elders in the room immediately knelt all at once.

“Great Dryas, the Grand Spirit Festival is still a ways in the future. What brings you here today?” Ursula asked reverently.

“Yeah, I just had something on my mind. I came to ask you guys about it.”

“I see. How may we help you?”

“Just now, I felt the presence of an unfamiliar spirit around this area. Seemed like a pretty high class one, but it disappeared almost immediately. I’m almost certain it’s someone’s contract spirit, but I don’t know who. Any ideas?”

Dryas asked, looking around the council room.

“...Yes, actually,” Ursula answered.

“Oh, really? Where is it?”

“I believe it is resting with the boy it contracted to at the moment. We have plans to bring him to this room tomorrow morning. What would you like to do, Your Greatness?”

Ursula’s answer made the other elders widen their eyes in shock. The only

contracted boy she could be referring to was Rio.

“Huh... So he’ll be in this room? Then is it okay for me to sit in attendance too?”

“Of course, Your Greatness. However, the boy is actually a human child...”

“Oh, my... How unusual. Humans are visiting this village?” Dryas widened her eyes in the slightest.

“Yes, there were special circumstances involved...” Ursula hesitated with a troubled expression.

“Hmm. Well, that’s of no concern to me. I’ll pop by again tomorrow morning. See you then.”

“Yes, Your Greatness,” Ursula acknowledged respectfully.

At the same time, Dryas’ figure disappeared into dust. She truly was a carefree soul, appearing and disappearing as she pleased.

“...There she goes. I never imagined she would appear so suddenly like that. It’s bad for my heart...” Ursula sighed tiredly. The other elders showed similar reactions.

“Gahaha! She’s a great high-rank spirit, after all. Of course she’s gonna be whimsical. We’re rarely granted her audience outside of the Grand Spirit Festival. Let’s just consider it good fortune this time,” Dominic said.

“That may be true... But, Ursula, what was that you spoke of before? Is it true?” Syldora agreed with Dominic’s words before narrowing his eyes at Ursula.

“Hm. Great Dryas’ words just now solidified my theory. Lord Rio has forged a contract with a spirit. Although it *is* a little worrying that he didn’t seem to be aware of it himself.”

“I see... One thing after another... I never would have expected this after being rattled awake so late. This has been quite an eventful night indeed,” Syldora said, pasting a strained smile on his face.

“Damn right. The most eventful of my life.” Dominic gave a great nod of agreement.



The next morning, Rio woke to find Latifa sleeping in his arms. Yesterday he had felt the oncoming symptoms of a cold, but now he felt surprisingly healthy, and it was all thanks to the elf medicine Ursula gave him. As he was stroking Latifa's hair through her sound sleep, a knock echoed from the door.

"Yes? I'm awake." Rio sat up and responded, then watched as the door slowly opened. There in the doorway stood three girls — the silver werewolf Sara, the elf girl Orphia, and the dwarf girl Alma.

"Good morning, Master Rio," The three all called out together before bowing in unison.

"Good morning. Is something the matter?" Rio bowed his head to return their greeting before asking the three of them to enter the room.

"Preparations for breakfast have been completed, so we came to call you. What would you like to do?" Sara answered on behalf of the three of them. She was the oldest of the group and often ended up acting as their leader.

"It's a very tempting offer, but I'd like to wait until Latifa wakes up. She'll get mad at me if I eat first." Rio smiled gently, shaking his head.

The girls' expressions clouded over slightly. Seeing how soundly Latifa was sleeping as she clung to Rio made them feel even more guilty about what they had done because of their misjudgment.

"...Understood," Sara said, bowing politely.

"Oh! How about some tea first, Master Rio?" Orphia clapped her hands together as the idea popped into her head.

"If it's not too much trouble, then please, Miss Orphia."

"I-It would be my pleasure! Please wait here for a moment." Orphia beamed before turning on her heel.

"Ah, I'll help you, Orphia!" Without a moment's delay, Alma eagerly followed Orphia out. It hadn't been long until Rio and Sara were the only two left in the room.

"A-Ah, umm..."

Sara almost considered going to help them, too, but her rational mind realized that three people weren't needed to prepare tea. She stopped in her tracks, feeling somewhat awkward at being left alone with a person of a different species that was also the same age. Their egotistical misunderstanding had one-handedly caused so much trouble for Rio, after all.

"T-Thanks," Sara said, bowing without thinking. Then, she realized how meaningless her action was, and flushed red. Sara ducked her head, her ears and tail twitching restlessly. Rio's eyes couldn't help but be drawn to their movements.

Do they just move of their own accord? he wondered with a slight tilt of his head.

"U-Umm, Master Rio?" Sara suddenly burst out nervously, making Rio stiffen up reflexively.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Umm. Did you know Latifa back when she was a slave, Master Rio?" Sara asked with a conflicted expression, unable to help asking a difficult question.

"No. I can imagine what kind of treatment she must have received, though. I never pried too deep because I didn't want to trigger any bad memories."

"...Is that so. Then, umm, if it's all right with you, Master Rio... Could you tell what you know?"

"It won't be a very fun story. You *are* aware of that, right?" It wasn't something to ask out of curiosity, Rio's words implied.

"...Yes, I know. But I want to hear it anyway." Sara looked at Rio, her strong will burning deep within her eyes.

"All right."

Rio began to tell Sara the details of his theory on how Latifa had been treated. How she was terrifyingly emotionless when he first met her, and how she carried a deep-seated trauma that occasionally manifested itself in the form of mood swings. That she was probably forced to undergo harsh combat training, and that she was an assassin who had tried to kill him. That she had never had a

proper meal in her life...

The huge, shocking truth rendered Sara completely speechless. But after Rio finished speaking, her blood boiled with rage until she was trembling to hold it back.

“Latifa is... She’s more incredible than all of us! Enduring such things...”

“Yes, I agree completely. She really is.”

Rio sympathized with Sara’s pent up frustrations; as a member of a species that had a strong sense of kinship amongst themselves, she would naturally feel even more anger than him.

“...But I can’t say I condone eavesdropping as a hobby.” Rio directed to the other side of the door.

His words made Sara gasp and whirl around towards the doorway. There stood Ursula, Orphia, and Alma.

“Noticed us, did you? My apologies. I had a few things on my mind regarding that girl,” Ursula apologized, a mystified expression on her face.

“Is something the matter with Latifa?” Sara asked fearfully.

“This is just my own conjecture, but... Latifa is probably of my bloodline.”

Ursula’s words made everyone present jump. She gave a helpless, bitter smile, and carefully chose her words as she continued to speak.

“Over ten years ago, a blood relative of mine had their daughter run away from home. She was a free and uncontrolled girl. At first, I thought she had grown bored of the village and had taken to wandering around nearby, but she never came home again. She disappeared without a trace, so we believed that she had been attacked by a monster or beast, but...”

Ursula looked at Latifa’s sleeping figure as it clung to Rio.

“I-Is that true?! Elder Ursula?” Sara asked, flabbergasted.

“Hmm. It happened long before you were born, Sara. I am not certain, but looking at Latifa makes me feel strangely nostalgic. I wish to ask her for her mother’s name, but at the same time I fear doing so. Her mother is no longer

alive, no?" Ursula said with a rather pained expression.

"Unfortunately, I have heard Latifa's mother is no longer of this world..."

"Is that so..." A sorrowful look came over Ursula's face.

"Mm... Onii-chan? Morning..." Latifa was woken up by the conversations occurring right beside her.

"Good morning. It seems as though breakfast is ready. Would you like some?"

"Yes, please!" Latifa nodded eagerly. Her peaceful smile showed no signs of the cruel past she had to bear. Right now, she was simply a happy girl befitting of her age.

"Lord Rio, I am truly grateful to you." Ursula thanked Rio sincerely.

"No, I..." Rio's expression clouded over as he shook his head guiltily.

I was only looking out for myself... he swallowed those words without voicing them.

"...Hm. Lord Rio has yet to have breakfast, right? I haven't had any yet, either. If you don't mind, may I eat with you?" Ursula suggested to change the solemn atmosphere of the room.

"Yes, of course. Right, Latifa?"

"Um... sure. If Onii-chan's all right with it." Latifa grabbed onto Rio's clothes and nodded shyly.

"Great, that makes things much simpler. I will introduce Lord Rio to the council of elders this morning. You lot, prepare the food. Bring your own servings along while you're at it." Ursula smiled broadly with happiness.

"Yes, right away! We'll bring it back here. Let's go Sara, Alma." Orphia took the initiative and moved first. She dashed towards the door.

"Indeed. Come on, or you'll be left behind, Sara." Alma went after her without missing a beat, calling out the slow Sara.

"I-I know." Sara snapped out of her momentary daze and ran out of the room in a hurry.



After leaving Latifa in Sara and Alma's care, Rio was led by Ursula and Orphia to the highest floor of the town hall, where the village elders had gathered.

The town hall was a treehouse built into a large tree located in the center of the village, the same building where Rio had stayed over last night. Rio climbed the spiral staircase that ran around the outside of the treehouse, overlooking the village buildings below. The spirit folk had completely integrated their lifestyle with nature, constructing houses of wood, stone, and clay in the forest.

It was a magical scene to behold.

Once they reached a point above the other trees of the village, they could see one particularly humongous tree that towered over everything.

"That's..."

"Fufu. That's the World Tree, where the Great Dryas — the spirit of giant trees — resides. It is said to have existed here long before we ever came to this land. It's huge, isn't it?" Orphelia explained proudly to a wide-eyed Rio.

"Yes. I made it here by heading towards that tree."

"...Amazing. A barrier of advanced illusion sorcery stretches around the World Tree, so it cannot be seen without extensive training in spirit arts." Rio's casual comment made Orphia's eyes grow rounder.

"Is that... so?"

Rio didn't seem entirely convinced, and tilted his head. Since he had never met other users of spirit arts up until now, he had nothing to compare his own degree of spirit arts with. However, he did recognize that his ability to freely imitate most sorcery spells just by breaking down the flow of essence in the formula was unfairly advantageous, even to himself.

"Hm. Lord Rio, you said you didn't learn spirit arts from anyone. Is that right?" Ursula suddenly asked as they walked.

"...Yes. I had a little push in the right direction... but I mostly studied it by myself." Rio hesitated in answering at first, but eventually agreed.

"I see. That's some incredible talent you have there. Perhaps..." Ursula said with a pensive look on her face, trailing off before finishing her sentence.

Before long, they arrived at the top floor.

“Here we are, Lord Rio. You come in too, Orphia.”

Ursula opened the door and gestured for them to go inside. Rio went in first, followed by Orphia behind him. Inside, various elderly figures sat on their chairs as they waited.

“Lord Rio, please take a seat over here. Orphia, sit next to Her Greatness and attend to her needs.”

Ursula directed Rio towards a chair near the doorway and Orphia to a corner of the room. There stood a young woman.

“...Huh?”

For a moment, Orphia doubted her own eyes. That young woman was an existence far superior even to her own as a blood relative of the council members in the village: the spirit of the giant tree, Dryas, who Orphia was just telling Rio about. Under normal circumstances, she would never be found in a place like this, but—

“What’s wrong? Get moving already.” Ursula showed no sign of being fazed as she nonchalantly ordered Orphia along.

“A-Ah, of course!” Orphia nodded awkwardly and headed towards Dryas. When Dryas caught sight of Orphia, she hugged her happily. But Orphia was nervous, making a single point of agitation in the peaceful room. The other elders in the council remained still and smiled contentedly at them.

After taking his seat first, Rio was looking over at Dryas and Orphia curiously, but redirected his gaze to the front. Before him were three seats for the three head elders: the high elf Syldora, dwarf leader Dominic, and the werefox Ursula.

“Now that all the preparations have been completed, I would like to start the elder council meeting. As we have invited a human boy as our guest on this occasion, we will progress in the language of humans,” Syldora said, declaring the start of the meeting. Just for this meeting, they would hold the proceedings in the common tongue of the Strahl region of humans out of consideration for Rio.

“Now, human boy. I would like to extend my apologies for calling you out here today. And I thank you sincerely for attending.”

“I should be the one saying that. It is an honor to be invited here.” Rio bowed lightly from where he sat.

“I am Syldora, one of the head elders of this spirit folk village. Beside me are the other head elders. I am sure you are acquainted with Ursula already. This dwarf man here is—” Syldora stood and began to introduce Dominic.

“It’s Dominic. Nice to meet you, human kid.” Dominic interrupted first, introducing himself.

“...As you can see, he is rather blunt. I apologize if he offends you in any way. I will introduce the other elders to you on another occasion.” Syldora let out a bitter smile with a small smile.

“Thank you for your consideration. It’s nice to meet everyone — my name is Rio.” Rio stood up and bowed deeply with a simple self-introduction.

“There is no need to humble yourself, Lord Rio. You are a guest and benefactor of ours. For the trouble my brethren have caused from their misunderstanding, as well as for releasing one of our kind from slavery, I offer you my deepest gratitude and apologies,” Syldora said, prompting all the elders of the room to stand up and bow their heads toward Rio.

From their sincere postures, Rio judged that their words of gratitude and apology were genuine. However, having those with clearly more life experience than him all bowing to him at once made him uncomfortable, and he smiled bitterly.

“I accept your words of apology and gratitude. In regards to the apology, I was also at fault for stepping foot into your territory unbidden. I did not receive any permanent or long-lasting damage, so as long as the misunderstanding has been cleared up, I do not believe it to be an issue. Let us forgive and forget it as an unfortunate mishap. Please, raise your heads,” Rio said with a calm and polite demeanor.

The elders swallowed an awestruck breath at how mature Rio acted, contrary to his undoubtedly young and innocent appearance.

“We are sincerely thankful for your selflessness,” Syldora began with a bow of his head, “but it is a fact that we returned the favor we received from you with ill-treatment. Thus, we would like to do something for you in return to express our remorse. Is there anything you desire, Lord Rio?” he continued, finding it somewhat difficult to voice his words. The gazes of the elders gathered on Rio.

“A desire... you say?” A confused look came across Rio’s face at the sudden topic.

Ursula added to the explanation with a sigh.

“You can name anything. Because of our difference in species, we weren’t sure how to best express our gratitude to you. Though there were some who feared what you would ask for,” Ursula said with a strained smile. A slightly guilty expression appeared on the faces of the elders as Rio nodded in understanding.

“I see... Then, could I request that you accept Latifa into your care? My original objective was to head towards the Yagumo region east of here.”

A serious look came over Rio’s face as he bowed his head towards Syldora, who was seated before him. The elders seemed rather taken aback.

“Hmm... But Lord Rio, that is one of *our* desires. If anything, it is something we should be requesting from *you*, not the other way around. You could ask for something more...” Ursula sighed, letting a wry chuckle escape. Rio shook his head slowly.

“You may say that, but I was the irresponsible one when I tried to take another’s life into my care.”

“Lord Rio...”

“That is why, if it is possible... If it’s not just my own wishful thinking, but right now, Latifa is... She is attached to me, I believe. That is why—”

“I beg you, Lord Rio. Say no more. At least let us be the one to make the request. How about it? Would you like to stay in this village alongside Latifa for a while?” Rio was struggling to find his words, so Ursula took over.

“That is... truly generous of you. Is it really all right?” Rio said, implying at how

his being human might cause an issue.

“Worry not. We discussed everything yesterday, and all the elders here have already consented to it. We would love to have you here, for that child’s sake as well,” Ursula confirmed decisively.

“That’s right! There’s no need to hold back. I like you, kid. Ursula told us about what kinda human you are, but there are some things you can’t tell without meeting someone face to face. And boy, do I agree! You’re an even bigger man than I was told about, kid.” Dominic laughed heartily, welcoming Rio.

“Indeed, it is exactly as Ursula and Dominic say. We will exert the utmost effort to accommodate your stay in the village and make sure it is comfortable. If you find that you need something at any time, do not hesitate to inform us.”

“That’s right. You could even ask for something other than material goods, like one of the village girl’s hand in marriage. Since you’re a good looking kid, too... if you’re so inclined, how about my Alma?” Dominic boasted, adding to Syldora’s words in good humor.

“Dominic, don’t get too carried away. Are you drunk?”

“Gahaha!” Dominic boomed with laughter after Ursula reprimanded him. Chuckles stirred among the other elders, instantly brightening the atmosphere of the room.

“Good grief. But that’s how it is, Lord Rio. There’s no need to hold back. Try searching for something that you want while living in the village. My apologies, but I must insist on expressing my gratitude somehow.”

“...I understand,” Rio chuckled, thinking for a moment before finally stating what he desired. “In that case, I would like to request your support in teaching me about spirit arts and your way of living during my stay in the village.”

“I see... That should be no problem at all.”

“Hm. We will prepare a gifted teacher for you.” Ursula and Syldora both nodded.

“All right! Now that your talk has wrapped up, can I get on with my business?”

Dryas' bright voice echoed through the room. All eyes in the room shifted towards her.

"Why, of course, Great Dryas. But, if I may, could I please introduce Your Greatness to Lord Rio first?" Ursula asked.

"Sure, go ahead." Dryas nodded easily in response.

"Lord Rio, seated over there is the spirit of the giant tree, the Great Dryas. Orphia spoke of her just before, if you recall."

"Umm... A spirit?" Rio's eyes widened in surprise. Dryas had been giving off an otherworldly aura, but her appearance was so humanoid... it was hard to believe she was a spirit.

"I'm Dryas. Pleased to meet you, Rio. Let's get along, shall we?" With an innocent smile, Dryas floated through the air towards Rio.

"I'm very pleased to meet you too." Rio returned the greeting with a confused face as Dryas abruptly shook his hand.

"Hmm... I knew it. Though it's really faint, I can feel the presence of a spirit within you. Perhaps it's sleeping?"

"...A spirit? Inside me?" Rio questioned in bewilderment.

"Yup. Does anything come to mind? You should've formed a contract with it."

"Contract? No, I can't say I recall anything..." Rio shook his head from left to right, puzzled. He had no memory of ever forming a contract with a spirit in his entire life.

"Really? That's strange... Ah, there's no need to be worried. I say contract, but there aren't any annoying obligations involved. If anything, it's more beneficial to you."

Unable to keep up with her words, Rio let out an absentminded "Huh..."

"Hey, do you mind if I take a look? It won't do any damage to your body, so there's nothing for you to worry about."

After a brief moment's hesitation, Rio nodded once. "...Yes, please."

"Then, excuse me..." Dryas said, gently grabbing Rio's face. Suddenly, Rio felt

the strange sensation of something unfamiliar entering him, but he accepted it without resistance.



“Wow... You have a tremendous amount of ode hidden within you. Looks delicious. Are you really human? Oh — it looks like a path’s formed after all. That means you’ve definitely made a contract, and—?!”

In the middle of her examination of the spirit sleeping inside of Rio, Dryas suddenly flinched. Her eyes widened in shock.

“Did something happen?” Rio asked, sensing something abnormal in Dryas’ state. “It sure is something... There’s a humanoid spirit sleeping within you,” Dryas replied with a confused expression. This caused the room to stir louder than ever before.

Rio still didn’t really get it.

“A humanoid spirit?”

“Mm... Judging by that reaction, you don’t know how rare humanoid spirits are. Orphia, explain it to him.” Dryas passed on the job of explaining to Orphia.

“Eh? Ah! Y-Yes, Your Greatness! So for spirits, only high class spirits and above are capable of taking on a humanoid form like the Great Dryas. It goes without saying, then, that such spirits are extremely rare. Some say you could count the numbers of them on one hand.” Despite her panic, Orphia provided a sufficient amount of information.

“And that’s how it is. In short, a spirit that rare is sleeping within you. One with the same amount of power — perhaps even more — as myself.”

“...Great Dryas, does that mean there is the possibility an upper high-class spirit is sleeping within Lord Rio?”

“I guess so. The upper high-class spirits known as the ‘Six High Spirits’ all disappeared over one thousand years ago in the Divine War, but it’s not like I know every humanoid spirit out there, either. I wouldn’t completely write off the possibility that the spirit sleeping within Rio is an upper high-class one,” Dryas answered casually, causing a noise of surprise to sound throughout the room.

“Erm, is there some problem with upper high-class spirits?” Rio asked Dryas, glancing sideways at the elders’ reactions.

“Nothing in particular. Oh, but it might be a big deal to the villagers who worship spirits. I’m already treated as a deity for being a high-class spirit, so if an upper high-class spirit appeared it might cause an uproar.”

“...Then why don’t you wake it up and ask if it’s an upper high-class spirit yourself?”

“I wouldn’t recommend that. It must have depleted most of its energy, as it’s in a deep sleep. Waking it up carelessly might make it sleep even longer, but if you leave it alone it’ll wake up on its own eventually.” Dryas shook her head, putting the sleeping spirit within Rio first.

“That makes sense... I understand.”

There were several points he was still curious about, but Dryas was a being worshiped by the spirit folk, and it would seem rude if he kept hounding her with questions. He decided to save them for Ursula later, and refrained from asking any more questions at the moment.

“Hmm. But if the spirit within Lord Rio is a high-class spirit at minimum, then we may need to reconsider our conduct toward Lord Rio himself,” Ursula said with a worried expression.

“What... do you mean by that?” Rio asked inquisitively.

“To put it broadly, it may be wiser to treat Lord Rio with reverence, like a holy man. We won’t ask you to take on any duties; we’ll simply adjust our perceptions for our own accord. You will not be burdened.” Syldora replied with a wry smile, sensing Rio’s doubtful wariness.

“Reverence...? No, I don’t feel like I’ve done anything to deserve that. Suddenly treating me that way will only bother me.” Rio said awkwardly.

“Gahaha! Well, don’t let it bug ya. Think of it as the village giving you an even warmer welcome!” Dominic said heartily, as always.

“Haha... I guess I shall.”

Rio could do nothing but nod with a strained smile.



After meeting with the elders and Dryas at the town hall, Rio met up with

Latifa and had lunch before Ursula led them to their new residence.

It was a few minutes' walk from the town hall, near the center of the village. Many of the council members in the village had their houses located here.

They arrived at a treehouse that was supported by the trunks of numerous trees.

"Wow! Look Onii-chan, there's even a deck! It's so wide! And with such a nice view!" Latifa ran around excitedly. One couldn't blame her — it had the feeling of a secret base. A fully loaded treehouse certainly had a charm that could make a child's heart dance.

"Hoho, how energetic. My house is next door — Lord Rio, please feel free to drop by any time. The house is already furnished, and I shall have Sara and the girls bring you your food."

"Thank you very much. You've really prepared everything."

"Oh, no need for that. Let me show you around the house." Ursula smiled happily and walked in.

"Come on, Latifa... Let's go. Ursula's giving us a quick tour of the inside."

"Yay, okay!"

Rio and Latifa followed her inside. The moment Latifa stepped into the entrance hall, she let out a loud cheer.

"Whoa!"

The first sight that greeted them was a wide and open living and dining room. Elegant furniture was placed about the room, and a sliding door connected to the deck outside. On top of that, there were several bedrooms along with a master bedroom, a kitchen, and a restroom, all fully stocked.

Honestly, no matter how you looked at it, it was far too large for just the two of them to live in.

For the most part, artifacts covered all of the utilities they required, allowing them to live a life nearly as comfortable as that of modern Japan.

"If there are any artifacts you don't know how to use, ask the girls later."

Lastly, let me show you the bathtub.”

“You even have a bathtub? I’d love that.” Rio’s expression brightened greatly at the mention of a bathtub.

“Oh? That look on your face tells me you enjoy your baths, Lord Rio. In that case, you may look forward to this. The bathtub in this house is rather magnificent, if I do say so myself,” Ursula said proudly, a big smile etched onto her face. Her confidence did not betray Rio’s expectations, as he found himself being filled with a sense of elation at the sight.

“Amazing. So this is a bathtub of the spirit folk.”

“Right? It’s amazing, Onii-chan! I want to jump in right now...”

Rio’s moods generally didn’t fluctuate up or down by very much, but that rule didn’t apply when it came to the bathtub of this house. Latifa’s eyes were sparkling, too.

Firstly, there was a proper changing area for clothes. Secondly, opening the door to the bathroom revealed the area to be clearly separated into a bathing area and washing area, just like a Japanese-style bath. This made it possible to wash the body before submerging in the water.

The floor, walls, and tub were all made of wood, a natural material that helped the space give off a wonderful, unusual quality suitable for refreshing oneself. Finally, the best part of all was the door that led to the outside deck, where another wooden tub was placed. In other words, an open-air bathtub — enclosed, of course, so that no one could peek.

“Hoho, I’m glad you find it to your liking,” Ursula laughed merrily at Rio and Latifa’s happiness.

“Umm, excuse me?”

Shortly before the sun was about to set, after Ursula had left already, Rio and Latifa were allocating rooms and organizing their belongings when they heard the sound of a girl’s voice from the entrance.

It was probably Sara and the girls. Ursula had mentioned earlier that they

would be bringing groceries over.

Rio hurried to the entrance and opened the door, and sure enough, there stood Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

“Good evening, everyone.”

“G-Good evening!” Rio greeted them amiably, which the girls returned with extremely stiff nerves.

Orphia was managing a smile, but it was rather strained. Alma had a cool and serious expression, nodding her head in greeting.

“I’ve heard the details from Ursula already. Thank you for all that you’ve done. Please, come inside.” While he felt a little uncomfortable at their reaction, Rio invited them all inside anyway. The three girls thanked him and hesitantly made their way in.

“Latifa, Sara and the others are here.”

“Hello, Latifa.” After being introduced by Rio, the girls greeted Latifa sitting on a sofa in the living room.

“Oh, hello again.”

Latifa responded politely, watching them carefully to judge their moods. At some point, she had gotten rather close to them. She had probably opened up a little when Sara and Alma took her in while Rio was speaking with the elders.

“Umm, Master Rio. I apologize for the interruption, but would it be all right if we brought the items in?” Sara asked, nervously jumping straight to business.

“Of course. Please do,” Rio agreed pleasantly.

“Thank you very much. Orphia, if you’d please.”

“Okay. Let’s start with moving the foodstuffs to the pantry. Our own belongings can come afterwards.” Sara and Orphia exchanged words.

Rio thought he heard something he should make a comment about in their conversation just now, but decided it must have been his imagination. The reason for that was the fact that the girls seemed far too empty-handed to be moving items.

“Umm, you all seem to be empty-handed... Where might the items be? I can help carry them.”

“Oh, don’t worry. We have them with us. Orphia, please.”

Sara giggled at Rio’s question, then asked him for the pantry location and headed there. Rio tagged along with the girls, curious as to what they were going to store there. Latifa skipped along next to Rio.

“*Dissolvo.*” Once they arrived at the storage room, which was kept at a low temperature with an artifact, Orphia held out a hand and chanted some kind of spell. The space before her hand started to warp, bending and twisting until various food items suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

“Huh?!” Rio and Latifa’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What Orphia used just now was a magic artifact... the Time-Space Cache. It uses the user’s essence to create an isolated dimension in time and space with the sorcery embedded in it, then withdraws items from the dimension when the user chants a certain spell,” Alma interjected with a rather proud explanation, having concluded the reason for their shock.

“To think such artifacts existed... that’s amazing. Can spirit folk use time-space sorcery too?”

“Yes. However, we’re limited by how much energy it consumes. The only ones who can use it are those with large amounts of ode... what humans would call essence. That is why high quality spirit stones are required to create artifacts with time-space sorcery embedded.”

“Spirit stones? Not enchanted gems, or essence crystals?” While Sara and Orphia started arranging the items to the side, Rio was unable to hold back his curiosity as he questioned Alma.

“Yes. It is an object that differs from the enchanted gems and the essence crystals crafted from them. You may think of them as a superior version, to put it broadly.”

“I see.”

With a nod, Rio finally joined the others in organizing the food. Alma did too,

and for a while they harmoniously went about working out where to place what.

Occasionally, Rio would come across a food item or ingredient that didn't exist in the Strahl region, but did exist on Earth, making him secretly react in astonishment.

"What's this...?" After spotting an item he simply couldn't let go of, he turned to ask Alma to identify it.

"Those are the grains from threshing rice husks. It's one of the products from threshing, and we eat it by boiling it or frying it."

The word she had used wasn't the exact same pronunciation as the Japanese word for rice, but from the description of how it was prepared, there was no mistaking it.

"While we have ingredients that are prepared in a similar way, this exact thing isn't available in Strahl."

"It was originally grown in the Yagumo region, after all. If I recall correctly, it was brought into the village over the long course of history and we started cultivating it."

"I look forward to both cooking it and eating it."

Thus, they chatted as they worked until they had put most of the food away in the pantry and returned to the living room. Latifa had been talking with Sara and Orphia while they cleaned up, allowing her to open up and feel a bit more relaxed compared to when they first arrived.

"So, umm... Master Rio. Which rooms shall we sleep in?"

After tea had been prepared and everyone was sitting on the sofas for a breather, Sara brought up the topic rather timidly.

"...Huh?" Rio gawked at Sara's words.

"Eh? Umm, the head elder... Elder Ursula didn't tell you anything?"

"Uh, tell me what?" He had an inkling of what was going on, but asked anyway to settle his heart.

“We were told to live with Master Rio in this house and attend to you two...”

Sure enough, Sara’s words were exactly as Rio expected.

“.....Whaaat?! You’re all going to live with us here?” Latifa responded with amazement after a few seconds to think.

“Yes. Will that be a problem?”

“W-Will it?” Orphia asked, prompting Latifa to look up at Rio sitting next to her.

“No, that’s...”

Rio’s expression conveyed a sense of disapproval. Though they were all young boys and girls, it was one boy to four girls — just imagining it made him feel weary.

“Erm, is it too much to ask after all?” Sara asked Rio with an anxious face.

“...Umm, is everyone here okay with that?” Rio asked. “I’m a man — and a human one at that, you know? If you came here on an order, then please don’t force yourselves to do this.”

His thinking was that Sara and the others might not want to live together with a stranger like him.

“We’re completely fine with it! Master Rio is a savior. And we can’t apologize enough for how terribly we treated you. So we’d like to repent for our actions through this!” Sara insisted heatedly, with Orphia and Alma nodding at her side.

“Ah, no, but... I don’t need repentance or anything.” Rio said, shrinking back.

“I-I understand that we may be a nuisance to you! We were actually worried that Master Rio would be the one to oppose this... It’s true that we were told to do this, but we’re happy to follow through with it! We want to get along more with Latifa, too!” Sara expressed wholeheartedly to the best of her ability. Rio could sense the determination within her; she wouldn’t back down easily.

The silence in the room continued for a moment, until....

“Lord Rio, I’m coming in.” Ursula appeared in the doorway.

“Ursula...” Rio shot her a questioning glare, wondering if all of this had been

her doing.

“I overheard part of your conversation. Regarding the topic of living together with the girls, Lord Rio, I would like to humbly request this of you.”

“Even if you say that... isn’t it undesirable for them? Sara and the others are of the same bloodline as the council members of the village, right? There’ll be bad rumors if they live with a human like me.” Rio whispered in Ursula’s ear, having briskly stood and approached her.

“All the more reason, then. Rumors about Lord Rio and Latifa are already spreading through the village. If the village council were to treat you like the plague, those negative rumors would be even worse.” Ursula shook her head dismissively.

“Will it really be all right?”

“It shall be. As a head elder, I guarantee this. This is an action we’ve taken for Latifa’s well-being. Lord Rio, you intend on leaving the village one day, no? Then it would be undesirable to continue this dependency she has developed towards you. You need individuals beside her who can be her guardian, her friend. While those girls still have a long ways to go, they’re all good girls.”

It was exactly as Ursula said. If he were to consider Latifa’s future, Rio had to be less protective of her.

“...You’re right. Both Latifa and I would greatly benefit from this.”

“Oho! Then may I take that as a word of acceptance?”

“Yes. If it’s not too much trouble for Sara and the others...”

Thus, it was decided that Rio and Latifa would live together with the spirit folk girls.

That night, to celebrate their new life together, they decided to hold a modest feast. The attendants were the new residents of the house — Rio, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma — and the three head elders, Ursula, Syldora, and Dominic, for a total of eight people. As the evening approached, they went about preparing the feast in the kitchen. Sara, Orphia, and Alma took charge of the

cooking, while Rio asked to help out.

However, sure enough...

“Master Rio, please take a breather,” they all told him.

“We’re going to be living together from now on, so there’s no need to accomodate me so much. We’ll all just get tired that way, don’t you think? And I’d prefer it if you stopped calling me ‘Master’ too,” Rio told them with a forced smile. The three girls looked at each other.

“Then, umm... Would it be okay to just call you Rio?” Sara asked on behalf of the group.

“Yes, that would be fine. Then let us do the housework in a similar fashion. We can decide the specifics another day, so let’s just cook together for today. This way we can check each of our skill levels at cooking too.”

“I want to eat Onii-chan’s cooking!”

Rio’s suggestion made Latifa excitedly jump into the conversation. The three girls — especially Sara — seemed concerned about assigning chores to Rio, but Latifa’s final word made them cave to his wishes. Then, after discussing who would be making what, they finally began preparing the food.

As a matter of fact, Rio was desperate to cook.

There were so many ingredients in the pantry that weren’t available in Strahl, so he wanted to try to remake as many of Earth’s foods as he could. Latifa would surely be ecstatic too. He would only make western foods that children liked — pasta, omelettes, and meat patties.

With skillful hands, he completed the cooking all the while avoiding getting in the way of the others, making Sara and Alma widen their eyes with awe.

“Fufu, this is fun... Cooking with everyone,” Orphia said, preparing food and grinning happily.

“Rio... is as good at cooking as Orphia.” Alma said. She was still a little reluctant to call Rio without a title.

“I-I won’t lose either!” Sara said enthusiastically, tackling the ingredients even more seriously.

In no time at all, a feast was upon them. The living room of their new house was soon buzzing with life.

“Gahaha! Your food’s great, kid!” Dominic laughed heartily, gulping down the alcohol in his metal cup.

“The ingredients are all items I’m very familiar with, yet the dishes are all new and innovative. I’m surprised to experience something this good at my old age.”

“Yes, what wonderful skill. My favorite is this egg dish with tomato.”

Syldora and Ursula smacked their lips at Rio’s cooking.

“I prefer this one here with potato and cheese. Its perfect with alcohol. Alma, what about you?”

“I like the meat dish best. It looked very difficult to make, but the taste is definitely worth it,” Alma replied as she munched on a patty.

“Ehehe, all of Onii-chan’s cooking is delicious!” Latifa beamed proudly as she ate the pasta.

“Rio, teach me how to make it next time,” Orphia requested pleasantly.

“O-Orphia, isn’t that rude?!” Sara warned her in a panic.

“Sure, I don’t mind. In exchange, teach me how to make some of your village’s dishes too.”

And so, one way or another, their life in the village had a fairly good start.

Chapter 6: Life in the Village

The day after Rio and Latifa settled into the village...

Rio was receiving a lesson on spirit arts from Ursula and Orphia in a courtyard near their house.

“Lord Rio, you mentioned you used spirit arts by imitating sorcery, but that isn’t the real way to use spirit arts. Let’s start by explaining what spirit arts actually are.”

“Please do.”

“Hm... The concept of spirit arts can be very abstract and difficult to understand, but you’ve already acquired all the technical skill required to use them. Not to mention the fact that you’ve formed a contract with an upper ranked spirit. You’ll be a top-notch spirit arts user in no time,” Ursula said with a merry smile, before continuing.

“Let me start from the beginning. Spirit arts are techniques that manipulate ode to impart your will into mana, causing phenomena that alter the world around us. Ode is life energy... or what the humans refer to as magic essence, while mana is the energy of nature itself. Since you can use spirit arts, you must be able to detect and visibly see ode, as well as detect the presence of mana. Would that be correct, Lord Rio?”

“That’s right. I can see and detect ode. With regards to mana, I can’t see it with my eyes, but I *have* been able to feel a strange power in the air at times. I wasn’t entirely certain about it until now, though.”

Ever since the first time he used spirit arts in this world — no, since he was taught how to use spirit arts by that mysterious girl — a sixth sense had awakened within Rio. His senses had become sharper, allowing him to feel things far beyond his former abilities.

Looking back now, that girl must have been my contract spirit.

She had appeared in his vision like an illusion, leaving him with the bare

minimum of advice before disappearing once more. Rio recalled how, back then, the girl had appeared extremely exhausted, and Dryas' comment about how she had fallen into a deep sleep certainly seemed correct.

"I see. Normally, it would take a great amount of training to reach that level of mastery, but it seems like Lord Rio is an exception due to the contract with a spirit of at least a high rank."

"Does the ability to use spirit arts enhance when a contract with a spirit is formed?"

"You may think of it in that way. A spirit arts user and a contract spirit are deeply linked together. Spirits are manifestations of mana that have their own, clear consciousness. They have an extraordinary affinity towards spirit arts, which is the act of manipulating mana itself."

"...Spirits are manifestations of mana with their own clear consciousness, you say?"

Rio wondered what it meant for mana — the energy of nature itself — to obtain its own consciousness and become a spirit.

"Hm. It's like I said earlier — Spirit arts are techniques that manipulate ode to impart your will unto mana, causing phenomena that alter the world around us. The reason why this happens is because mana itself has a vague sense of consciousness. Spirits are beings of mana that, under some miraculous alignment of circumstances, come to form their own clear sense of self."

"I see... That's why they can create their own form and communicate. What kind of forms can spirits take outside of humanoid ones?"

"It would be faster if you saw it for yourself. Orphia..."

"Yes, Head Elder. Ariel."

Prompted by Ursula, Orphia nodded and called out the name of her own contract spirit. Particles flowed together and gathered beside her to form a four-meter-long eagle-like creature. Rio swallowed back a gasp at the phenomenon that had just occurred before his eyes.

"Spirits normally reside within the user's body in their spirit form, but they

can take on a physical form like this when summoned. To a spirit, the arts user's body is a source of ode supply. It's comfortable for them to stay there."

"Can it speak like Dryas can?" Rio asked as he watched Ariel fool around with Orphia.

"It cannot. It can understand our words, and has a simple telepathic connection to its arts user, but only humanoid spirits can hold conversations. Once your spirit awakens, Lord Rio, you should be able to converse with it all you like."

"Yes... There's a lot I'd like to ask once it wakes up."

"Hm. If there's anything you don't know at this point, we can try to answer you to the best of our ability."

"Thank you very much. Then, to start... I've always wondered why I couldn't obtain any magic through spell contracts before. Up until now, I assumed it was because I had a peculiar physical make-up... but could this also be caused by my contract with a spirit?"

Spell contracts were one type of sorcery: a ritual that absorbed formulas into the body through sorcery, allowing magic to be obtained. However, all of Rio's attempts to make a contract until now had always failed at the stage where he had to take the formula into his body, forcing the ritual to come to an abrupt halt. He had never once succeeded at the ritual.

"Exactly. Taking a spell formula into the body is essentially like turning the human body into an artifact. In other words, it turns a natural being into an unnatural one. And spirits are natural existences — they wouldn't want their contracted body to become unnatural."

"Thank you. My longstanding question has finally been answered. This means that if I hadn't formed a contract with a spirit, I would have been able to acquire magic through formula contracts, right?"

"That would be the case, yes. But in return, you would no longer be able to use spirit arts. Magic is similar to spirit arts in that it manipulates ode to make mana alter reality. However, in the case of magic, the mana is being put to work by the formula instead of the user. When the formula is within the body, mana

becomes unable to accurately perceive the will of the user.”

“So it’s either one or the other when it comes to spirit arts and magic. Once you learn one, you can no longer learn the other... I can understand that much, but is there a particular reason why spirit arts haven’t spread at all in the Strahl region?”

“You may not have noticed it yourself, Lord Rio, but spirit arts are much more difficult to learn than magic. I touched upon this in the beginning, but to use spirit arts, you must be able to detect ode, visibly perceive ode, and detect mana. However, the only requirement magic needs is the ability to detect ode. Out of all the intelligent beings out there, humans have especially low affinity towards spirit arts. Since magic is easier to acquire, it is emphasized as the foundation for humans to learn. And in the case of the Strahl region, the Seven Wise Gods were also deeply involved in bestowing magic upon the humans living there.”

“The... Seven Wise Gods? Not the Six Wise Gods?”

Rio’s eyes widened. As far as he knew, the gods that the Strahl people worshiped were referred to as the Six Wise Gods. He had never heard of them as a group of seven.

“Oh, do the humans only speak of the Six Wise Gods? According to our legends, there were seven gods that appeared in the Strahl region during the Divine War that occurred over a thousand years ago. The seventh god was exiled by the other six, so the humans must have completely erased that part from their history.”

“I had no idea...” Rio’s interest was piqued by the difference in their history, but now was not the time to ask about it. He decided to refrain from questioning any further and derailing the topic at hand: learning more about spirit arts.

“Hmm. Incidentally, there are spirit arts users amongst the humans of the Yagumo region to the east. The use of magic didn’t spread over there during the Divine War. Speaking of which, I completely forgot to ask... Lord Rio, were you born in Yagumo? You seem to have come here from Strahl, yet your hair color is that of the humans born in Yagumo.”

“No, I’m originally from Strahl. But my parents were migrants that moved from Yagumo to Strahl, so...”

“Ah, is that so. That must be why you’re heading to Yagumo.”

“Yes,” Rio said simply, without adding any additional details. He gave an evasive smile and a short nod instead.

“I see, I see. Hm. My apologies — I seem to have gone off track. What were we talking about?”

“The difference between magic and spirit arts, Head Elder. And how the story of the Seven Wise Gods came to be,” Orphia informed Ursula, making her grin.

“Oh, that’s right. Thank you, Orphia. Which reminds me... there was one more thing I need to ask you, Lord Rio.”

“What is it?”

“Well... We spirit folk use not only spirit arts, but sorcery as well. There are some things spirit arts aren’t suitable for, after all. However, the one thing we make sure to avoid is writing magic into our bodies. That is where my question segues in: has Latifa acquired any magic?”

“Just the one. Don’t tell me... Can Latifa no longer use spirit arts?” Rio asked, expression clouding over slightly.

“No, it won’t be a problem. It *is* possible to remove formulas from the body. We will take it out of her before she begins her spirit arts lessons. When that happens, Orphia, you shall be her teacher.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to teach her yourself, Head Elder? Latifa is your...” Orphia examined Ursula’s expression carefully.

“It’s fine. If I took on the role, I’d be too soft on her,” Ursula beamed widely.

“My words were out of line. Please forgive me,” Orphia said, bowing her head.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Let us return to the topic at hand. Anyway... Depending on the capability of the user, spirit arts can cause phenomena far more freely than magic, and even do some things that magic can’t do. For example, this,” Ursula explained, using her spirit arts to create a small ball of fire at her side. Then, the

fire changed its form into a person, an animal, a sword, and then a spear — each transformation taking less than a second.

“That’s... amazing. Magic formula can be altered before the spells are cast, but they cannot freely change shape after they’ve been activated. So that’s what you meant.” Rio watched the fireball with round eyes.

“Hm. As long as you continue to use spirit arts to imitate magic, the mana will only alter phenomena in response to your image of magic. In order to use spirit arts more freely, you must first discard that preconception of yours. It may be best to start with your specialty elements. What spirit arts are you good at, Lord Rio?”

“Spirit arts I’m good at? I don’t have any particular strengths or weaknesses. I’ve heard that people have magic they can and cannot learn, but I have yet to encounter a magic I couldn’t imitate...” Rio answered, making Ursula’s eyes widen this time.

“Oh? Normally people have their own individual affinities for particular elements. You must be an all-rounder type like Orphia, your resident high elf. It might be better to simply start learning from what you *want* to learn instead. What kind of spirit arts would you like to learn? You could even learn how to fly, if you wanted.”

“Flying...?”

“Correct. Orphia, show him.”

“Yes, Head Elder.” Orphia nodded. Suddenly, a draft of wind started to blow around her, lifting her body up into the air. Rio’s eyes widened in shock.

“That’s amazing. Will I be able to do that too?”

“Of course. Being able to fly should make your travels much easier as well, Lord Rio. Let us start with how to float in the air, then practice various flight controls little by little.”

“It sounds like a worthwhile art to learn. Please give me your guidance.” Rio gave a fully motivated smile and bowed.

Meanwhile, at the same time as Rio's spirit arts lesson with Ursula and Orphia, Sara and Alma had invited two of the village children over to introduce them to Latifa.

"Arslan, Vera. This is Latifa. She can only speak the tongue of the humans right now, but I hope you can all get along," Sara said, gesturing towards Latifa, who was sitting beside her.

"Okay! Hi, Latifa. My name's Vera. Let's be friends!"

"H-Hey. I'm Arslan. Nice to meet ya."

Sitting on the sofa across from Latifa was the silver werewolf Vera, whose greeting was energetic, and the werelion Arslan, whose introduction was shy. Vera and Arslan were both of village council bloodlines — Vera was Sara's little sister — and were taking lessons on how to lead the village in the future. The two were the leaders of their age group, so by becoming Latifa's first friends, they could encourage the other children to warm up to her one at a time.

"N-Nice to... meet you. I'm... Latifa," Latifa introduced herself hesitantly.

"Ehehe! I'm so happy to make a new friend! Let's talk about lots of things together!" Vera said, standing up from the sofa and moving to sit down next to Latifa instead. "Here's a question for you!" she said, throwing out questions one after another.

Arslan was a little bashful, but did his best to speak to Latifa, too. It didn't take too long for Latifa to open up to them.

"Arslan, you're acting a little weird. Why won't you look at Latifa in the eyes? And your face is a little red, too." Vera tilted her head at Arslan, who seemed rather nervous and uncomfortable.

"He's just being shy. Latifa's cute, after all."

"Yes, that's right," Sara and Alma said, smiling happily.

"Wha — that's not it! You're wrong! What are you two saying?!" Arslan denied with a furious blush on his face.

"Ehehe... Arslan's right. Because Vera's so much cuter. You're just shy, right? I am too." Latifa took Arslan for his word.

“Wahoo, that makes me so happy! But I think Latifa’s cuter,” Vera said, hugging Latifa tightly.

“Ah, no, that’s not it...” Arslan mumbled as he tried to take back his earlier words, but Vera’s loud voice drowned him out. His shoulders slumped at his mistake.



“Fufu. That tickles, Vera.”

Vera rubbed her cheeks against Latifa’s, making her giggle at the ticklish sensation. Their ears flicked happily on top of their heads.

“Since we’re such close friends now, what do you think about playing outside together? Would it be okay if I introduced Latifa to the others, sister?” Vera asked after she was satisfied with how much they had played together.

“Sure, go ahead. But remember that there will be children who can’t understand her tongue, so you two have to mediate between them. Got it?” Sara said, giving her permission after stating her one condition.

“Of course!” Vera chimed in. “Yeah! Let’s go already. I wanna play tag!” Arslan added.

Vera and Arslan took Latifa’s hands and pulled her into a dash towards the entrance. As they headed outside, they ran into Rio, Orphia, and Ursula, who had just returned from their spirit arts lesson. Seeing Rio made Latifa’s expression liven up in a flash.

“Ah, Onii-chan! Welcome back!”

“Wahoo, is this Latifa’s brother? He’s so cool!” Vera looked at Rio’s face and grinned.

“Hoho, how lively,” Ursula said.

“Ah, Head Elder! Good day.”

“Hello, Head Elder.”

Arslan bowed politely at Ursula, with Vera following in kind.

“Are you going out, Latifa?” Rio asked.

“Yup. We’re going to play outside. Is that okay?” Latifa said timidly.

“Of course that’s okay. I’m glad. I’ll make dinner and wait for you, so go play all you want. Thank you for treating Latifa nicely, you two.” After giving permission for Latifa to go out, Rio turned to Vera and Arslan.

“I see... So Latifa’s brother is the human who came from outside the village. I’ve heard the story from my sister, Sara. It’s very nice to meet you,” Vera

greeted Rio politely, as Arslan bowed nervously.

“P-Pleased to meet you.”

“Thank you. It’s very nice to meet you too. I hope you’ll be good friends with Latifa.”

“We sure will!”

“Yes!”

Rio returned the greeting, to which Vera and Arslan both nodded enthusiastically.

“If you’ll excuse us, Sara and I will accompany the children.”

“We’ll leave the rest to you, Rio. Orphia.”

Sara and Alma left to supervise Latifa and the others.

“Okay! We’ll have some tea and start making dinner. Have fun.” Orphia saw the outside group off with Rio and Ursula.

“We will. We’ll be back soon — hey, you! Wait up! Don’t run ahead!” Sara chased after Latifa and the others in a hurry.

“Hoho... How energetic they are,” Ursula mumbled with a smile. Rio’s mouth was also turned up in a peaceful smile.



And so, several months passed since starting their life in the village. With so much to learn, the busy and bustling days went by in a flash. On one such day, after Rio and Latifa had become accustomed to life in the village...

Rio was in the middle of his spirit arts lesson with Ursula and Orphia, when Latifa came running toward them at an incredible speed.

“Onii-chan!” She skidded to a stop just before colliding with Rio, then latched onto him. Then, she wrapped her arms around his neck and climbed up his back, until she could peer over his shoulder at his face.

“W-What’s wrong?” Rio asked, slightly thrown off-balance. At the same time, Vera and Arslan appeared, followed by Sara taking up the rear.

“Hey, you!” As soon as Sara appeared, she scolded Latifa, Vera, and Arslan.

“What did you do, Latifa?” Rio asked again as Latifa rubbed her cheek against Rio’s face innocently.

“Sara won’t give us any break time. She said I couldn’t come see Onii-chan!”

“Don’t lie, Latifa. Your statement is intentionally misleading; I said you could see him once you finished studying. I’m only mad because you snuck out before you were done,” Sara responded to Latifa’s unhappy words in a logical manner. Latifa puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

“But studying every day is boring! I want to learn spirit arts too.”

“You have many other things to learn right now. And you’ve started learning spirit arts already, no?”

“But I want to be with Onii-chan.”

“You shouldn’t be selfish like that,” Sara said with a stern shake of her head.

“I don’t wanna! Hmph, Sara’s such a grump.” Latifa muttered under her breath. Sara’s mouth dropped open in dumbfounded shock.

“Wha... Latifa! Sit down right there!”

“Don’t wanna!”

“Kuh, this child...” Sara’s body trembled as Latifa mockingly stuck out her tongue. Her cute and fluffy ears and tail were twitching in a menacing way.

“S-Sara, don’t you think Latifa must be feeling lonely?” After watching silently until now, Orphia quickly stepped in to calm Sara.

“That’s right, sister. Latifa just wanted to see her brother. She’s studied so much more than us, so she deserves the break! Don’t you think?”

Vera tried to chime in with her support, but suddenly...

With a noisy, flapping sound, a human-shaped figure descended from the sky.

“What’s wrong? There seems to be a commotion over here...” It was the winged werebeast, Uzuma. She looked around at the gathering of people and widened her eyes upon spotting Ursula and Rio. She immediately dropped to one knee before them.

“I-If it isn’t the Head Elder and Lord Rio. Good day...”

“Hum. It’s been a while,” Ursula nodded.

“H-Hello, Lady Uzuma.” Rio returned the spirit folk’s greeting somewhat awkwardly. This made Uzuma turn to look at Rio with wide eyes.

“You’ve already learned to speak the language of the spirit folk?”

“Y-Yes, if it’s at an easy enough level, at least. I’m... I’m still not used to it, though. I learned together... I learned with Latifa,” Rio replied to Uzuma’s question in a stiff manner.

“I’m surprised. And, well... I am sorry for what happened in the past.”

“...Oh, no. I am still not used to your language yet, so please excuse my use of the Strahl tongue from here... In regards to what happened, I have heard that you were punished by being put under house arrest. Please do not let yourself be troubled by the incident any further. All is forgiven.” At first, Rio wasn’t quite sure why he was being apologized to, so he took a moment to respond.

“Uzuma — long time no see. When did your house arrest end?” Sara asked Uzuma, joining in on the conversation.

“Long time no see, Lady Sara. It just ended this morning.”

“I see. Will you be returning to work today?”

“No, I am still resting from my warrior duties. The first thing I wanted to do after I was allowed outside was to apologize to Lord Rio...” Uzuma said, expression clouding over with guilt.

Rio gave a strained smile and shrugged. “Don’t worry about it.”

“So you don’t have anything else to do for today, Uzuma?” Sensing the awkward air between Rio and Uzuma, Sara changed the topic out of consideration.

“Yes, nothing in particular.”

“I see... then, would you like to spar? It’s been a while, right?”

“O-Oh, sure. I don’t mind...” Uzuma nodded mildly.

“Ooh! Uzuma and Sara are sparring?! I wanna see that!”

“Do your best, sister!” Hearing the word “spar” made Arslan and Vera jump with excitement.

“Who’s stronger?” Latifa asked her two friends curiously.

“That’d be Uzuma, of course.”

“My sister, for sure!”

Arslan and Vera replied at the same time, but with different answers.

“No, no... Uzuma is the warrior chief. Sara’s strong, but she can’t defeat her yet.”

“That’s not true!”

“You’re just biased towards your family, Vera!”

“Grrr!”

Arslan and Vera bickered like noisy spectators.

“But I think my Onii-chan is the strongest!” Latifa chimed in, unable to endure listening silently any longer.

“Sorry to say this about Rio, but my sister is the strongest.”

“Uzuma is definitely stronger than everyone else!”

Vera and Arslan immediately shot down Latifa’s statement, but Latifa refused to back down, too.

“That’s not true. Onii-chan drove away a whole flight of demi-dragons by himself!”

“A whole flight of demi-dragons, you say...”

“Impressive as always.”

Uzuma and Ursula both murmured in awe. Sara and Orphia also threw a look of respect Rio’s way.

“It wasn’t anything spectacular. I’m still in training too,” Rio responded with uncomfortable modesty.

“Umm, Rio. What do you think about sparring with me once? I always see you swinging your sword alone early in the morning and late at night, so I wanted to

try fighting you,” Sara requested in a humble manner.

“Onii-chan, do your best!”

“You too, sister! This is the perfect chance to show everyone who the strongest is!”

Latifa and Vera cheered before Rio could even get a word in. Evidently, they had already decided that Rio and Sara’s match was set in stone.

Or rather, they were just happy to have an excuse to get out of more studying.

“Then, shall we?” Rio wasn’t brazen enough to betray the pure expectations of two young girls.

“Yes please!” Sara nodded happily.

After that, Uzuma took to the air and brought their training weapons back.

News of their match spread before they knew it. Before long, a small crowd had gathered, making their sparring session more like a mini event of sorts. They drew straws to decide who would be sparring together first — the result was Rio and Uzuma. Once they had settled on the rule of limiting spirit arts to the use of body enhancement only, Rio picked up his longsword and stood across the square from Uzuma, who gripped her short spear tightly. Sara would be their referee.

“Begin!”

The match finally began, and Uzuma charged at Rio the instant the signal was given. The propulsory force of her wings sent her shooting forward like an arrow. Her incredible speed closed the gap in the blink of an eye, and she released a sharp jab towards Rio as though to test him.

Rio saw through the jab easily, using the minimum amount of movement to shift his body and evade it.

“Oooh!” the spectators cheered.

Meanwhile, Uzuma continued to launch an avalanche of stabbing attacks towards Rio, who parried them efficiently with his refined movements. A surprised expression flashed across Uzuma’s face, and she widened the distance

between them. Then, she took on a lower stance and readied her spear, charging forward with her body held close to the ground to aim at Rio's chest from below. Rio received the attack head-on, but Uzuma tried to brute-force her spear through his defenses. Once Rio's body had been lifted up, she focused more strength into her arms and stepped forward firmly, flapping her wings to blow him fully into the air.

I see her crazy strength hasn't changed, Rio thought as he flew through the air, impressed by Uzuma's physical strength.

Of course, Rio had strengthened his own body with spirit arts too, but there was a vast difference in the basic fundamental build of a human and a werebeast. That difference was all the more emphasized when their bodies were enhanced with spirit arts.

"Hah!" With a powerful yell, Uzuma flew into the air and launched a follow-up attack on Rio. She aimed at Rio's limbs in mid air, stabbing her spear four times in one breath with precision.

Rio twisted his arms and legs around his body to evade them by a hair's breadth. Then, before Uzuma could withdraw her extended spear, he grabbed the pole with his left hand and pulled her towards him instead.

Rio swung his longsword horizontally, aiming for Uzuma's torso. Uzuma immediately let go of the spear and flapped her wings upwards, positioning herself just out of reach of Rio's sword.

With his left hand, Rio readjusted his grip on the spear and swung it at Uzuma above him, but the tip of spear uselessly cut through empty space. It would be difficult to catch her in the air.

The two landed back on the ground, maintaining their distance — until Uzuma charged at Rio once more. Rio casually tossed the spear towards Uzuma.

"Kuh!"

Uzuma's specialized weapon was voluntarily returned to her before she could steal it back, slowing her reaction by a fraction. In the time she took to hurriedly catch the spear, Rio spied an opening and charged forward.

Oh, how the tables had turned.

Uzuma tried to back away to regain her balance, but Rio closed in so she couldn't escape, now so close to her that she couldn't freely swing her spear. He weaved through the gaps of her defenses sharply, slashing his sword.

"Guh..."

Uzuma was at a disadvantage. Overwhelmed by the factors working against her, she only barely managed to block Rio's attack, forgoing her own to do so. If Rio had been swinging a real sword, she would have been covered in countless wounds already.

Rio thrust at Uzuma's momentary opening with massive force, swinging his sword in his strongest hit yet. The spear was blown away, causing Uzuma to stumble back from the recoil. She leapt after the spear, catching it midair.

"...I acknowledge that your abilities are worthy of a warrior. It seems I must take this seriously." Uzuma's aura suddenly changed as she landed on the ground.

A chill ran down Rio's spine. It was like looking into the eyes of a starving beast.

In the next instant, Uzuma had closed the distance between them and aimed a harsh thrust at Rio's body. The suffocating pressure made Rio step to the side immediately. At the same time, though, he could feel a bad presence flanking him, so he stepped backwards next.

Moments later, Uzuma's spear passed through where Rio had just been with the sound of air being ripped through.

"Huh, well done evading that. Let's see if you can dodge this!" Uzuma said in delight as she firmly stepped forward and swung her spear with all her might.

So heavy!

Rio had tried to receive the attack with his sword, but he felt the difference in their physical strength, and had to jump back to negate the power of the spear.

"Isn't this a bit too much for a sparring match?" Rio said with a wry smile, but he seemed to be having fun.

"You'll have to forgive me! I haven't encountered an opponent this worthy in

the last few months!” Uzuma yelled with a ferocious smile. It seemed as though Uzuma was a bit of a battle junkie... That thought made the corner of Rio’s mouth curl up faintly. He certainly wasn’t one to talk. It was nice to have a simple and straightforward fight like this sometimes, where neither opponent was overthinking things. At the very least, Rio could feel himself getting heated by being able to spar with someone who he could face with all his might.

That being said, while he wasn’t losing in technical ability, as a werebeast, Uzuma was far in the lead in terms of physical ability. At this rate, the fight would slowly become one-sided.

He had to even the playing field.

With that decision, Rio released a huge amount of ode from within his body. Then, he condensed it, and poured all of it into his physical enhancement. In using physical enhancement through spirit arts, physical ability was raised in proportion to the layer of ode cloaked around the body, so if his base strength was lower than a werebeast, all he had to do was strengthen his spirit arts enhancement... that was Rio’s thinking, at least.

“Mm... What dense ode.”

Ursula’s eyes widened as she looked on. Sara and Orphia, who were watching beside her, gulped. The villagers who had gathered out of curiosity were in a similar state.

The answer Rio had come up with was simple, but not something anyone could do. Even if a considerable amount of ode could be released, controlling it was another matter completely. Condensing such a massive amount of ode to cloak the body required a considerable display of control; it was no wonder their audience was surprised.

“I see you weren’t taking this seriously before, either,” Uzuma said with a grin.

“No, I was serious. Although I may not have been using my full power.”

“I see. However, you still seem fairly far from your limit...” Uzuma closed in on Rio as she spoke, swinging her spear.

“No, I’m having a fairly difficult time here.” Rio received the attack head-on.

This time, he didn't lose to the battle of power.

"You can say that with a straight face? Ha!" Uzuma thrust her spear forward wildly, but Rio moved his hand swiftly to intercept each move.

Their weapons clashed several times in quick succession; if they had been using metal weapons, sparks would have been flying. Their exchange of blows appeared to be a close contest, but Uzuma was slowly being pushed back. While Rio hadn't moved a single step, Uzuma had been moving around to attack from all angles. Eventually, Uzuma's breath grew short.

"Amazing. No matter how I attack you, it doesn't feel like I can land a blow at all!" Uzuma stated happily, and in a stubborn attempt to make Rio move, drove her spear up from a lower angle, putting all her might into one thrust. Rio took half a step to the side and evaded it elegantly.

Then, he retaliated with a swinging slice at Uzuma. His sword was aimed precisely at her body, stopping just barely before making direct contact.

Judging that the hit was one she certainly could not have dodged... "...I admit defeat. Forgive me — I became too frenzied in the heat of the moment." Briefly, her expression twisted with frustration, but she accepted her loss calmly and gave a polite bow.

"No, I had fun. I'd love to spar again some time."

"Yes, it would be a pleasure!" Rio offered her a hand, which Uzuma shook immediately.

They seemed to have come to an understanding. The air of awkwardness present from before the fight had dissipated, leaving relaxed expressions on both of their faces. The spectators of their fierce battle watched in dumbfounded amazement.

Meanwhile, Latifa puffed up her modest chest proudly.

"See? Arslan? Vera? I told you! Onii-chan is the strongest!"

"Y-Yeah. Rio really is amazing," Arslan replied to Latifa's words with a dazed expression.

"S-Sara hasn't fought yet! My sister is strong!" Despite being shaken, Vera

boasted for her sister's sake with all her might and looked at Sara with hopeful eyes.

V-Vera, don't raise their expectations! I've never even won against Uzuma before! As she was on the receiving end of her little sister's pure expectations, Sara broke out into an excessive sweat.



Several days after the sparring match between Rio, Uzuma, and Sara...

Early in the morning, while the others were still asleep, Rio and Sara sparred again. After she had tasted defeat at Rio's hands, Sara had asked Rio to train her.

"Your movements are getting duller. Do you want to take a break?"

"I-I'm still... fine...! I want to at least land a scratch!"

Unlike Rio's calm breaths, Sara was panting harshly. Her tone was a little rougher than usual too. Even then, she held her wooden knife and attacked Rio.

"All the warriors of the village have wonderful physical abilities, but their movements are inefficient. The same goes for you, Sara. You make too many unnecessary movements." Rio dodged Sara's attack as he gave her advice.

Perhaps it was because of their isolation deep within the forest, living peacefully amongst their own kind, but the battle style of the village's warriors were entirely specialized towards facing creatures of the natural world. Since they would never fight amongst themselves, the most practice they got from fighting others like them was through practice matches.

Furthermore, since their individual physical abilities were so advanced, it didn't require them to hone their combat techniques against other people. That's why when it came to fighting others, their style was dauntless and daring, to put it nicely... or reckless and foolhardy, to put it bluntly. Rather than luring the opponent into lowering their guard, changing their attacking pace to shake up the opponent, or relying on technical movements, they preferred to fight with plain strength and speed.

That preference applied to Sara too.

“I-I know that!” Sara said, lunging to stab at Rio with a large swing.

Rio grabbed her hand easily, toppling her off-balance and throwing her to the side. Sara flipped in the air and landed on the ground.

“For someone so calm, you’re unexpectedly competitive,” Rio said with a small smile.

“Grrr! But... but... the battle isn’t over yet... It’s not over yet!” Sara was bright red with frustration and a little bit of embarrassment. In order to brush that off, she charged towards Rio again.

Suddenly —

“Good morning, you two. Do you mind if we join you, Rio?”

“Morning! I wanna do it too!”

A sleepy Alma and Latifa appeared. The two of them wanted to learn from Rio’s training as well, but neither were morning people, and often showed up late like this. However, it was still early in the morning, so they had plenty of time to practice before breakfast.

“I’ll check the forms I taught you yesterday, so let’s slowly go through the movements.”

They all poured their sweat into training until Orphia finished preparing breakfast and came to call on them.



After their morning practice, Rio and the others sat on deck chairs and ate the sandwiches Orphia had prepared for breakfast.

“Ugh... I couldn’t land a single hit on Rio again... Ah, this is delicious,” Sara muttered with her head hung low, munching on her sandwich dejectedly. Her wolf ears were drooping a little more than usual.

“Sara was defeated rather splendidly,” Alma pointed out, making Sara’s wolf ears flick in response.

“A-Alma, you’re not one to talk! You were in a similar position to me.”

“I’m not as reckless as Sara.”

“Ugh...”

Sara was in no place to object, having had Rio make similar observations numerous times.

“I like Sara’s direct way of approach. We’ll work on fixing her habit of getting too engrossed and making the same repetitive motions again and again.” Rio smiled faintly from where he sat before Sara, offering her words of encouragement. Sara blinked blankly for a beat.

“Y-Yes... Please.” She looked down, her cheeks reddening with embarrassment. Taking the sandwich with two hands, she munched furiously with her small mouth.

“Sara, your face is red,” Alma said, looking at Sara’s face apathetically from where she sat beside her. Sara startled.

“W-Wha — That’s not true!”

“You know that’s not what he meant by ‘like’!” Alma whispered in her ear, low enough that Rio wouldn’t hear it from where he sat across the table.

“I-Isn’t that obvious?! W-What are you trying to imply?!” Sara’s cheeks reddened even more.

“Fufu, what are you talking about, Sara?” Orphia asked with an amused smile; she was sitting on the other side of the table just beside Rio.

“O-Orphia, you’re an elf! You could hear that clearly, couldn’t you?!”

“Fufu, who knows? Right, Rio? Latifa?” Orphia said, looking at them for their response.

Rio had been unable to hear their conversation midway, so he tilted his head in confusion. But Latifa, who had been sitting between Rio and Sara on the other side of the table, opened her mouth.

“You know, Sara actually—”

“L-Latifa!” Sara stood up in a panic, covering Latifa’s mouth with a hand.

“Mmph!”

“I-It’s nothing, Rio! It’s absolutely nothing!”

Rio nodded, overwhelmed by Sara's menacing look. "A-All right. But Latifa looks like she's in pain, so please let go of her," Rio said, smiling wryly.

At Rio's order, Sara hurriedly removed her hand from Latifa's mouth and apologized. "S-Sorry."

"Geez!" Latifa puffed up her cheeks cutely in anger.

Orphia and Alma giggled at the scene. Rio also chuckled quietly, and Latifa began to giggle with high-pitched laughter, too.

Sara was the only one who was blushing.

"Oh, that's right. Rio, are you aware of the Grand Spirit Festival in two months time?" Orphia suddenly said after laughing for a while.

"Yes, I've heard of it."

"About that... Just recently, your cooking was highly praised amongst the council members of the village."

"Really?" Rio's eyes widened. It was the first time he was hearing of this.

"Yes. I previously made lunch for the council of elders with a recipe I learned from you. It was a huge hit."

"I see. But what does that have to do with the Grand Spirit Festival?"

"There's a banquet held after the Grand Spirit Festival, so I was thinking of having some of your recipes on the menu. So, Rio... I know this is a lot to ask of you, but would you consider teaching them to the ladies of the village?"

"Sure, I don't mind. It would be my pleasure to help," Rio agreed pleasantly.

"Thank you very much! Then I'll set up a cooking class sometime in the near future. I'll inform you of the details at a later date."

Orphia's expression brightened in delight, her smile like a blooming flower.



Food from all corners of the continent of Euphelia was cultivated in the village of the spirit folk. The spirit folk themselves were once scattered around the continent, before being persecuted by humans and forced into migrating to the village over time. As part of the migration, they brought foods from different

regions with them, resulting in their current state of agriculture.

The spirit folk had advanced farming technologies, and Dryas, the spirit of the giant tree, oversaw the great forest; its fertile soil was heaven for plant life. This allowed the crops to grow under the best conditions.

The village truly was a food paradise.

Rio took advantage of that blessing ever since he started living in the village, using his knowledge from his previous life to painstakingly recreate different foods of every origin — be it Japanese, Western, or Chinese. Furthermore, Orphia — who was particularly enthusiastic about cooking in comparison to the other girls — was learning how to make gourmet spirit folk food. She was very interested in the varieties of food Rio could make, and they spent their time together teaching each other their recipes.

And so, here in the house where Rio and the others lived, dishes from both Earth and the spirit folk would line the table every day. Occasionally, they'd invite Ursula and the other head elders over, and they'd all smack their lips at Rio's cooking. Eventually, rumors began to spread, and Orphia ended up treating the elder council to the recipe that she had learned from Rio. The feedback was extremely favorable, and as a result, everyone wanted Rio to hold a cooking class. Rio accepted their request, and it was decided that he would teach his recipes to the ladies of the village.

Most of the participants were younger ladies; though their species had longer lifespans (they developed at the same rate as humans until their mid-teens, from which their aging dramatically slowed), their appearances didn't quite match their real ages. There were over fifty of them present.

At the moment, an appetizing smell was wafting from the food preparation room in the town hall, which was filled with the cheerful voices of apron-clad women. Despite readily agreeing to the whole thing, there were far more participants than he expected, which made Rio feel uncomfortably awkward as the only male in the room.

That being said, he wasn't about to back down after already accepting, so he put on his mask of responsibility and devoted himself to playing the role of the teacher.

After distributing the recipe sheet to each group, he went through each preparation step while giving tips about handling the ingredients and how strong the fire should be. Next, each group went about preparing their own food, following the recipe and Rio's steps, which they had just observed. Rio and Orphia — his assistant — split up and walked around each group's table, watching over their students as they worked. Once the cooking started, groups started to come up with questions and obstacles, so he would assist with those, too.

He spotted one such group just now.

"Sara, Alma, isn't this tomato sauce a little too sour?" Latifa asked, licking at the teaspoon of sauce she had scooped up.

"Mm, that's true..."

"The sour taste is a little strong."

Sara and Alma's expressions clouded over as they tasted the sauce.

"Bleh, the one Rio made was so much smoother, too." Vera also licked at the sauce, before shaking her ears and tail. That was when Rio appeared.

"Let it simmer at a lower flame for a while, and hold off on the water. Once it's boiled through, add water to adjust the thickness. Make sure to taste it frequently. If it doesn't get any better, add broth and simmer for longer," he advised after tasting the sauce with a teaspoon.

"I see... so it hasn't boiled enough yet."

"Tomatoes lose their sourness when they're heated, after all. It settles the flavor and brings out the sweetness. Also, if you add too much broth, you'll lose the taste of the tomato sauce, so make sure to only add a little," Rio added in explanation, making Alma nod in understanding. Latifa and Vera were chatting away noisily beside them.

"Ehehe, we can eat yummy rice croquette and cabbage rolls with this."

"Anya's group is making cheese omelettes and chicken braised in tomato sauce. Let's swap some with them later."

"Ooh, I can't wait!"

The cooking class continued smoothly after that. After some time, completed dishes started to appear amongst the groups.

“All right, I’m sure all the men are hungry by now, so let’s move the completed dishes to the dining room and serve it before they cool. The only thing left after eating is the cleanup, so please take your time.”

At Rio’s order, the groups with finished dishes began moving out to the dining room. The groups with more experienced women had finished first, leaving behind the groups formed of mostly younger girls. However, they didn’t appear to be too far behind. Rio walked around the tables while cleaning up what he could, retrieving any leftover ingredients. With no need for an assistant anymore, he sent Orphia to join Latifa’s group, then took the opportunity to make some food for himself.

He threw some butter and onion into a frying pan, added some finely chopped chicken thighs, and sauteed them. Once the onions had become translucent, he added tomato sauce and mixed it. Then, he added some leftover butter rice and fried it until it was loose and non-sticky. The chicken rice was completed in no time at all.

Next, with some swift and bold — yet precise — movements, he moved a frypan in his hand and made an omelette. He placed the completed omelette onto the chicken rice and made a cut down the middle, adding a little tomato sauce on top for the finishing touch. With that, the thick and fluffy omurice was complete.

With some ingredients left over, he decided to make one omurice, and completed it just as the last two groups wrapped up their cooking. One of the groups was Latifa’s, who came running over.

“Onii-chan, let’s eat together!”

“Sara and the others are eating with that other group, right? I’ll be fine, so you should go eat with them,” Rio replied with a troubled expression toward Latifa’s carefree smile. The other group was made up of girls that Rio had never interacted with before, so he thought it was best to avoid getting involved as an outsider.

“Eeeh... What are you gonna do, Onii-chan?”

“I’ll just eat by myself.”

“No, I wanna be with Onii-chan!” Latifa threw a tantrum.

A werecat girl whose name he didn’t know called out to him from the side.

“That’s right. Let’s eat together, Rio... Please?”

“Umm, are you sure?”

“Of course! You’ve been living in this village for almost half a year now, but you only ever mingle with Lady Sara’s group. I’ve always wanted to talk to you. Right, everyone?” the werecat said, looking behind her. A group of girls had suddenly formed behind her, nodding along enthusiastically. Everyone looked to be in their mid-teens; probably older than Rio.

“I understand. I’d be happy to, then.” Unable to reject their offer, Rio accepted the offer to eat with Sara’s group and the older girls. They all moved to the dining room, lining their completed dishes along a free table.

All the dishes passed in terms of appearance. An appetizing smell wafted through the air, but the girls’ gazes weren’t looking at their own dishes, but rather focused on the omurice Rio had made.

“Hey, Rio. What kind of dish is this? We didn’t practice making this one,” the werecat girl asked curiously. “It’s omurice!” Latifa answered on Rio’s behalf. Omurice was her favorite.

“Huh, is this one of the recipes from Strahl too, then?”

“Yes, though its name varies by area,” Rio lied, glancing at Latifa. “In Latifa’s case, she calls it omurice. I made extra, so feel free to help yourself.”

Latifa made a sound of vague acknowledgment before giving an awkward smile. Rio heaved a small sigh and pulled his eyes away from her.

“Yay. Thank you, Rio!” The werecat girl suddenly clung to Rio’s arm. Everyone present looked on with widened eyes.

“A-Any, why don’t we start eating now? It’ll get cold,” Sara said in a bit of a panic. The werecat girl was apparently named Anya.

“Yup, wouldn’t want all this cooking to go to waste. Let’s eat.” Anya happily let go of Rio’s arm with a nod. She took the lead and started to hand out the

plates of food. Rio had a strained smile on his face. He had the impression that she was a whimsical and uninhibited kind of person.

“I’ll serve your share, Onii-chan!” Latifa reached out for Rio’s share before he could move.

“Having such a devoted and cute little sister must be great, Rio.” Anya said with a grin.

“Yes, it really is. She’s much too cute for me,” Rio agreed unabashedly.

“Ehehe, the only boy who calls me cute is you, Onii-chan.” Latifa responded bashfully.

Eventually, the food was split between everyone, and they finally started eating.

“Fuwawah! This omurice is so delicious!” Vera took a bite of Rio’s omurice and expressed a somewhat over-exaggerated opinion.

“I know, right? I told you Onii-chan’s cooking was delicious!” Latifa said.

“Yup! Not a surprise, considering it’s from Rio!”

“Thanks, you two.” Rio expressed his gratitude to Latifa and Vera for complimenting his cooking skills.

“Yup, yup. Rio really is exactly as Lady Sara and the others described,” Anya said, nodding earnestly.

“In what way is that, may I ask? I’m a little curious,” Rio asked.

“Oh, well... You’re polite, you’re kind, you’re cool, you’re strong, you’re so smart you learned our language right away, and you’re really good at spirit arts. It was all praise, really!” Anya answered clearly.

“A-Anya!”

Sara, Orphia, and Alma all blushed in embarrassment; Sara, in particular, had been rendered speechless. Having their image of Rio exposed like this must have made them feel shy.

“Ahaha. I’m happy to hear that, even if it’s just flattery.” Rio interpreted Anya’s words as flattery and brushed it off.

“No Rio, it’s not just flattery.” Anya seemed just a little exasperated.

The lively atmosphere continued after that, allowing Rio to deepen his relationship with the girls through idle chatter.

Chapter 7: Uninvited Guest

On one particular day, after Rio's life in the village had passed the six month mark...

In the western parts of the Wilderness, on a particular mountain range, a lone griffin was flapping its wings, soaring far up in the air.

Griffins were called the lions of the heavens, renowned for being rulers of the skies, second to only the dragon family. They were extremely intelligent creatures, but had wild temperaments, and mostly inhabited mountain areas. As their upper bodies were birds of prey, one of their characteristic traits was their high-pitched screeches. However, to some citizens of the country, they were beasts to be kept as riding animals.

"M-Mr. Reiss. Is it really okay to be so far out here?"

Two humans sat upon the back of the griffin. One of them — a small boy with the appearance of an adventurer — asked a question to the black-robed man named Reiss, sitting behind him with the reins in his hands.

"Yes, it's fine. However... if this much is enough to scare you, then perhaps you aren't quite suited to be a member of our mercenary squad after all, hmm?" Reiss heaved a huge sigh, the question being one he had answered numerous times already.

"N-No, that's not what I was saying! I-I just wanted to know where we were going. Several days have passed since we entered the Wilderness already." The boy hurried to explain himself, making him seem all the more scared.

Nature filled the scenery before their eyes. There wasn't even as much of a trace of a human presence — only dangerous beasts prowled the area, so it was only natural for a fledgling adventurer like him to be scared.

Until just recently, the boy had been part of a small adventurer party that fought weak monsters for pocket change. As a fresh newbie on the scene, every day was a hurdle to cross— until one day, he was approached by Reiss, who

invited him into the famous mercenary squad named after griffins: The Heavenly Lions. He had considered Reiss to be a rather shady figure at first, but once The Heavenly Lions were brought up and he was told they were scouting out young adventurers to personally train, he decided to at least hear him out.

Thus, after being shown the insignia of The Heavenly Lions — and even a griffin itself — the boy's desire to become a hero had been easily piqued, and he found himself cheerfully agreeing to joining the squad before he knew it. Once he did, he was immediately given a mission to complete as an initiation task. Events continued to progress right before his confused eyes, until he eventually found himself casually riding on the back of a griffin, half-regretting everything.

"Fufu, we've arrived at our destination. Let's descend here," Reiss said, controlling the reins in his hands to lower the griffin down the mountainside. The mountain they landed on was made of exposed bedrock and was lacking much vegetation.

I-if I'm going to do this, I'll do it right! I'll get better! By the time they arrived at their destination and touched down on the ground, the boy had made up his mind.

"Let's go," Reiss said, suddenly walking off.

"Yes!" the boy nodded with great enthusiasm, running after him.

After walking towards the summit for around an hour, they came across a large cavern right before the peak.

"Oh, are we going in there?"

"That's right. Preliminary investigations have already been completed. The master of this cave should be out hunting for food at this time, and won't be returning for a while, so there's no need to worry," Reiss explained in a calm tone, making the boy sigh in relief.

"You can wait here. I shall return in a few minutes." With that said, Reiss said nothing more and entered the quiet cave. Then, true to his words, he returned from the cave a few minutes later.

Thank goodness. Now we can go back, the boy thought. But just as relief was

flooding through him, he noticed the item Reiss was carrying with both hands and stiffened in shock.

“M-Mr. Reiss, what is that?”

“Can’t you tell? It’s an egg,” Reiss answered indifferently.

“W-What kind of egg?”

“Oh, are you curious?”

“Ah, no...” Scared to find out the truth, the boy reflexively shook his head.

Though it was indeed just an egg, it had a diameter of over 30 centimeters. Its shell was so thick, it looked like it would require a blunt weapon to crack, and its weight was easily 10 kilograms, too.

“Here. I am handing this to you.”

“Hweh?” The boy let out a dumbfounded noise.

“You need to hold this egg — I have to steer the griffin, after all. I’d love to put it in the bag, but we can’t afford to throw away our food for the return journey, now can we?”

“...R-Right.” Unable to argue against Reiss’ detached explanation, the boy nodded awkwardly.

“Good. Now, shall we return to the griffin?”

Reiss walked off, the boy hot on his heels. He didn’t want to stay here any longer, and he felt completely numb as they returned to where the griffin was waiting.

“W-Won’t the parent be mad? What if it tries to retrieve its egg? I mean...” The boy asked with a twitching smile before they mounted, stricken by his worries.

“It’ll be fine, of course.” Reiss pasted a creepy smile on his face as he answered. “How far do you think the distance is from here to Strahl?”

“Right... Of course...”

“Let us return, now. Make sure you hold onto the egg tightly, understand?” After he received a nod of acknowledgment from the boy, Reiss ordered the

griffin to take off. However, the direction they were traveling towards was not Strahl, but the great forest where the spirit folk lived. Later that night, a tremendous and terrifying wail echoed in the cave Reiss had visited.



Finally, the day of the Grand Spirit Festival arrived. The main stage of the ritual was to be held in the spirit shrine built near the roots of the giant tree that Dryas protected. It took half a temporal hour (or roughly one regular hour) to walk there from the village. With the exception of the minimum level of security, nearly all of the spirit folk — over ten-thousand of them — had gathered in the magnificent grounds of the shrine.

The spirit of the giant tree, Dryas, stood on an altar placed on the shrine's dance stage, looking down at the elders prostrated before her — among those present included Syldora, Dominic, and Ursula.

“Under the divine blessing of the Great Spirit, may her grace and protection be with the spirit folk for all eternity...” A solemn atmosphere dominated the entire area as Syldora and the others offered their prayer.

Once the ritual prayer was completed, the elders stepped down from the stage. Then, Sara, Orphia, and Alma appeared on the stage dressed in ceremonial attire, and began their song and dance of appreciation towards Dryas.

Dryas looked down at the three of them happily.

“They’re so pretty...”

Underneath the dance stage, Latifa was watching the magical dance of the girls in admiration. After the three girls finished their performance, Syldora took to the stage once more and began to speak in a stately tone.

“Ladies and gentlemen! The Spirit Festival has once again commenced safely. This is all thanks to your untiring efforts, daily prayers, and dedication to the spirits over the past year. Let not your gratitude to the dream spirits ever wane.” Syldora was by no means speaking loudly, but the amplification effect of wind spirit arts easily carried his voice across the whole area.

“Now, let us continue the ritual,” Syldora’s voice continued, making Latifa

flinch hard.

Every year during the Grand Spirit Festival, it was custom for spirit folk children who reached a certain age to be introduced to everyone in the village and receive a blessing from Dryas. Latifa was one of those children this year. Furthermore, those who received Dryas' blessing would be graced with a slight increase in total ode and spirit arts affinity, though it wasn't as much as a spirit contract would grant.

Rio noticed Latifa's nervousness and reached out to squeeze her hand. In response, Latifa lifted her head and pulled together a brave smile.

Syldora called out the names of the children to come up to the dance stage. There, a simple introduction and greeting was given for the villagers to familiarize themselves with the children. Next, Dryas placed a blessing kiss on their forehead, and the bodies of the children would glow with a soft light.

Latifa's name was called after all the other children received their blessings.

"Half a year ago, one of our brethren came to join us: the werefox, Latifa."

After her name was called, Latifa's went up to the stage, her small body trembling.

"She has suffered greatly at the hands of heartless humans, but at the same time, she is here with us today thanks to the kindhearted human who extended his hand in help. She is an admirable and kind girl." At Syldora's introduction, Latifa gave an awkward bow. Then, like the other children before her, she walked towards Dryas' altar.

"This way, Latifa."

"Y-Yes." Urged forth by Dryas, Latifa went right up to her.

"This makes you an official resident of this village. I hope you find yourself at home here," Dryas said, before suddenly scooping Latifa up in a hug. This was a lot more contact compared to the others, who had only received kisses. The crowd murmured quietly.

Latifa, in shock, unintentionally let out a yelp. "Fweh?!"

"Fufu. You've suffered so much until now, I thought I'd give you a little special

treatment. I can only do this much for you, but I hope you'll always find strength in your heart."

"Y-Yes!" Latifa gave a great, emotional nod.

Dryas then placed a gentle kiss against Latifa's forehead; a faint light immediately began to shine from Latifa's body. Despite the unexpected occurrence, Latifa too received Dryas' blessing.

And with that, the blessing ritual was complete.

If the festival had been following the same progression as prior years had, this was where the closing ceremony would be held before moving on to the banquet. However —

"Lastly, I wish to introduce the one who rescued Latifa. Our one-sided misunderstanding caused him much trouble in the past, but he forgave us, and allowed us to start over anew. Thus, we are greatly indebted to him. Allow me to introduce you to Latifa's benefactor — and ours too — Lord Rio," Syldora began his introduction.

With a light nod, Rio climbed up the staircase of the stage. Once he was standing beside him, Syldora continued. "Lord Rio has taught us many interesting food recipes. They are delicious, and they will be served at the subsequent banquet, so do look forward to it."

The mood over the shrine grounds softened a bit.

"Lord Rio has contracted with a humanoid spirit. This is a truth that has been confirmed by the Great Dryas herself, so there is no mistake. ...Silence!" Syldora barked at the flurried villagers; his words had caused the grounds to burst into noisy chatter.

Until now, Rio's contract with the humanoid spirit had been kept a secret from those outside of the village council. But they had chosen to play their hand at this very moment. The result was perfect.

"As a member of the village council, I cannot allow someone who has contracted a humanoid spirit to be disrespected — no matter whether he is a spirit folk or not." At Syldora's words, the elders all gave great nods of agreement. The aim of their action was to outwardly express the unity of the

council's opinion on the matter.

“Lord Rio is our benefactor. His wonderful personality has been made more than clear over the past six months of his stay here. That is why I am considering accepting Lord Rio as a sworn friend of us spirit folk. Does anyone object?” Syldora inquired in a loud voice, causing a silence to fall over the shrine grounds. Deeming there to be no objections, Syldora continued speaking.

“Then, I would like to humbly request that the Great Dryas grant Lord Rio a blessing kiss as a symbol of our sworn friendship. Lord Rio, Great Dryas.” At Syldora's urging, Rio approached the altar where Dryas was.

“Fufu. Let's get along, small human hero.” Dryas smiled. Once she had awarded a kiss on Rio's forehead, Rio's body began to glow with a soft light. After a beat of silence, the grounds burst into loud cheers and applause.

“Now, the ritual has come to an end! It's banquet time! Get ready!” Dominic announced the end of the ceremony as the applause died off.

Immediately, the bustle of the villagers became directed towards the food, and the banquet management staff began the preparations in a fluster. They freely used spirit arts to guide the crowds, set up the banquet area, and distribute the food and drinks efficiently. A young male elf and winged werebeast flew in the air above, acting as messengers, dispatching work orders, and guiding the villagers with voices amplified by spirit arts. Dwarf men were using spirit arts to manipulate the dirt, creating makeshift tables and chairs throughout the shrine grounds at a quick pace.

Meanwhile, Orphia and several other elf girls were using their Time-Space Cache artifacts to bring out completed dishes and drinks one after another, as the men of varying species raced to carry them to every table. Thus, work progressed as the others looked on, and before long all the preparations were completed. The banquet began with a loud toast.

“Gahahaha! You're sure drinking well today, Rio, my boy!” Dominic held a sake cup in one hand as he laughed heartily at Rio, who was drinking with him.

“Yes — I don't normally drink because I have practice, but I thought I should at least drink freely today. The alcohol of this village sure is high quality.” Rio said, raising his cup to his mouth.

This wasn't exactly flattery, but a compliment from the depths of his heart. There were several types of alcohol offered at the banquet, but even the cheapest bulk-produced alcohol of the spirit folk exceeded the quality of what the highest nobility and royalty in Strahl drank. Of course, it went without saying that the progression of drinking was also faster.

"Well, *duh*! Our village only brews real sake! 'S not like them human-made drinks that they only drink to get drunk!" Hearing the village's alcohol being commended made Dominic laugh merrily.

"It's exactly as you say. Now that I've had this sake, I can never go back to Strahl's alcohol."

"Good riddance! This isn't even the top tier of the alcohol we make. Just wait 'til you try our spirit folk specialty, Soul Sake!" With a grin, Dominic took out a mythrill carafe and glass. He poured its contents into the glass and offered it to Rio.

"This..."

"Shh, just drink."

The instant Rio peered into the glass, a mesmerizing, mellow scent tickled his nose. A thick liquid filled the cup, drawing Rio's mouth towards it almost involuntarily. The moment the sake touched his tongue —

"Wuh?!"

The taste was so exquisite, it almost made Rio's jaw drop. He pressed his mouth closed in a panic, but the intense flavor of the alcohol was already seeping throughout every inch of him.

It was so good, it felt like his soul was slipping out of his body. The sake was probably dubbed Soul Sake for this very reason: because drinking it caused a near out-of-body experience, Rio mused.

Unable to resist the temptation, Rio brought his cup to his mouth for a second sip. Before he knew it, the sake in his mouth had disappeared, as though it evaporated into thin air.

No, the sake definitely passed through Rio's throat... The taste was just too

much for him to process, making it seem as though it had disappeared in an instant. For such a high potency, it was terrifyingly easy to drink.

This was first-rate drink, most worthy of being called Soul Sake. He couldn't even consider Strahl's alcohol to be alcohol anymore. Lost for words, Rio's body shook with the emotions running through him. That was when Dryas appeared, a glass held in one hand.

"What do you think? My sap is in that," she said.

"Hrrrk!" Upon hearing Dryas mention her sap, Rio choked.

"Kya! Eww, geez. What are you doing?"

"I-I'm sorry. I was just surprised. This is the sap of Your Greatness?"

"That's right. It's called Soul Sake, isn't it? As the spirit of the giant tree, I'm the soul that resides in the sap used — hence the name. My sap is even used in elixirs," Dryas said proudly.

"I-I see..." If the sap produced sake of this quality, then it could certainly be used as a miracle component for medicines too.

"I'm impressed, though. Only dwarves can drink that sake properly. You must be a heavy drinker, Rio," Dryas said with wide eyes.

"You got that right, Your Greatness! It's almost a shame a guy like this is a human. Now drink up, drink up!" Dominic agreed cheerfully as he refilled Rio's glass. The dwarf elder had already consumed a fair amount of alcohol himself, but his face still appeared just fine.

"It really is a potent alcohol. It's almost scary how easily it goes down despite that." Rio looked at his Soul Sake-filled glass with reverence.

"Right? Normally they end up like that." With a pleasant smile, Dryas directed her gaze behind Rio, who turned around and followed her gaze. There he saw —

"O-Orphia?!" Orphia was stumbling over her own feet, heading towards Rio. Her face was so red, it was evident she was drunk with just one glance.

"Mashter Riooo, are you... drinkin'...?" Orphia asked with a slurred lisp, flopping down in the seat next to Rio. The difference between her usual gentle

self was so great, Rio was dumbfounded.

“U-Umm, Orphia, haven’t you had too much to drink?” Rio asked with a twitching smile, sending her words of concern.

“Ah! I’m... I’m fiiiine. This... ish barely nothin’...”

You’re clearly not fine at all! — Rio wanted to yell. Suddenly, Orphia sidled up right against Rio.

“Mooore importantly, Rioooo! When will you shtop shpeaking sho shtiffly?!”

“...Umm, I speak stiffly?”

“Yesh! You shpeak like yer tryin’ to dishtance yourshelf.” Orphia held her eye contact with an oddly steady gaze. She spoke so insistently, Rio couldn’t help but shrink back.

“I’ve gotten sho closhe with Latifa, yet it baaaarely feelsh like I’m fwiends with Rio. Ish been half a year shince you came here. Thish can’t be right...”

At a loss for how to deal with a drunk Orphia, Rio looked to Dominic and Dryas for help. But the two of them had disappeared from where they were drinking mere moments ago, standing far in the distance and laughing at Rio instead.

They abandoned me! — Ah, it’s Sara! Just as despair overcame Rio, he noticed Sara coming his way and heaved a sigh of relief.

“Good grief! Orphia, you’re causing trouble for Rio!” Sara said, holding her glass with both hands as she sat down and glued herself to Rio’s hip.

Judging by her appearance, Sara still seemed to be clear-headed and sober, but Rio could feel that something was terribly wrong. In all the time they had spent living together, he knew that Orphia and Sara weren’t the type to touch him so proactively.

“Erm... Are you drunk too, Sara? Haha...” Rio asked, looking into Sara’s eyes.

“Y-Yes. Umm, I may be a little drunk.” Perhaps she really was, as her cheeks reddened when she nodded. Her eyes darted about the place, and her tail also twitched restlessly. She pressed herself even closer.

“Right... Shall I cast a sobering spirit art on you?” Feeling his body being squished in from both sides made Rio pull himself together and ask.

“N-No! I’d get even more embarrassed if you did that!” Sara shook her head in a fluster.

“Thash right. Lishen to Shara,” Orphia spoke up in agreement.

Even more embarrassed... That implied she was feeling a certain level of embarrassment at the moment. And yet, she still chose to stick to him this closely. Rio calmly tried to discern what the reason for that could be.

However, the girls clinging on each side of him made it very difficult to think.

How did it end up like this? Rio lamented to himself.

Both Sara and Orphia were both of such high status, they could be considered the village’s princesses... and they were extremely beautiful as well. Rio couldn’t stand being in this situation, but it was the type of circumstance where it wouldn’t be strange if all the men around him glared daggers in his direction.



Then, as though to deal the finishing blow: “Hmph! Orphia, Sara, that’s unfair!” Latifa suddenly hugged Rio from behind him.

“Are you drunk too, Latifa...?” Rio dropped his head in resignation.

Her face was as close to him as possible, and he could smell the faint scent of sweet Soul Sake from her mouth. Far in the distance, Rio could see Ursula cackling happily with Dryas and Dominic. He immediately concluded that this was their dirty work.

At that very moment, one more figure appeared and called out to Rio. It was Alma.

“Good evening, Rio. May I join you too?”

“Yes, of course.” Rio nodded in delight. Alma’s eyes still had a modicum of reason within them.

“Honestly, just because Soul Sake tastes good doesn’t mean you can drink as much as you like,” Alma said with amused exasperation as she moved to sit facing Rio. They were less than an arm’s length away from each other, but it was the perfect distance to be able to converse without yelling over the noisy banquet happening around them.

“Looks like you’re not drunk yet, Alma.”

“Dwarves have a high alcohol tolerance.” Alma smiled faintly at Rio’s relieved face.

“Alma shooo cuuute!” Orphia, sensing the faint change of expression in Alma’s face, suddenly hugged her.

“Wah! That tickles, Orphia!” Despite her embarrassment, Alma didn’t resist.

Sara giggled. “Alma used to be such a crybaby, always following me and Orphia around. She was so cute... But now she’s become a boring, mature adult. Can you believe she used to call us Sis?” She said, revealing old stories of Alma to Rio. Rio and Latifa looked at Alma in surprise.

“W-Wah! Sara! What are you saying?! You’re too drunk!” Alma tried to stop Sara in a panic, but it was too late.

“I want to hear more about Alma when she was little! Right, Onii-chan?” Latifa laughed in excitement, turning to Rio.

“Right,” Rio agreed teasingly.

“N-Not you too, Rio... D-Don’t you think we should be using this time to deepen our friendship instead?!” Alma yelled, face blushing a deep red.

“Thash right! I wanna be better fwends wif Rio! But Rioooo keepsh trying to maintain hish dishtance!” Orphia latched onto the topic Alma brought up, emphasizing her earlier statement.

“W-With me...? But I’m already living with you...” It took a beat before Rio could find a response, but he couldn’t quite deny the distance he had been trying to keep. They may have been living under the same roof, but Rio had definitely spent the whole time keeping his walls up while interacting with them.

“It’s true that we have been living together. You help us with our training and teach us how to cook, too. H-How should I put this... Even though Latifa’s learned to love us like older sisters, there’s still this sense of distance when it comes to you. And that feels a little... I-lonely, you know? We’ve become sworn friends now, so...” Sara’s cheeks blushed crimson as she avoided Rio’s gaze and spoke with a sharp tone.

“We jus’ wanna be better fwendsh. Ehehe,” grinned Orphia. In the end, it all came down to that one simple phrase.

So that’s why they’re being so clingy... and bold... in their actions. Though I don’t think it was the right way to approach this... He was happy they decided to express their feelings in such a straightforward manner. Rio glanced sideways at Latifa, who had climbed onto his back and was peeking over his shoulder. She was grinning happily as she watched over the course of events.

Was Latifa behind all this? Sara and the others don’t usually act this way.

With that thought, Rio couldn’t help but smile. The girls had gone this far out of their element just to become closer friends with him. That fact made him very happy.

“W-What’s so funny?” Sara asked with a red face. She was either drunk, or

feeling embarrassed by how directly she had expressed her desire to be closer friends.

“Nothing, I’m just happy. Thank you, everyone. It’s part of my personality that I’m not very sociable with others, so I would be very grateful if we could continue to get along well.” Rio smiled gently, looking around at the girls and bowing slightly at them.

“Y-Yes! We would love that!”

After blinking blankly for a moment, Sara and the others nodded in delight. They took each other’s hands and jumped around with noisy cheers.

“Now we can all be best friends!” Latifa said happily from where she clung around Rio’s neck.

“Gahaha! Looks like that’s all settled. Here, I brought some food and sake over... Now you can deepen your relationship with this.” Dominic suddenly appeared out of no where and approached the group with a hearty laugh. Ursula stood behind him.

“I knew you two would be involved as well...” Rio said with a troubled look.

Ursula gave a good-humored cackle. “Oho, it looks like everything went exactly as planned.”

“Grandfather Dominic, what is the meaning of this?” Alma looked at the proffered food and drink curiously.

“You’re a dwarf, too, aren’t you? All you need to do is eat, drink, and laugh, of course!”

“Please don’t include me in that muscle-brained species stereotype of yours.”

“Gaha! What a handful this one is! How about it, Rio, my boy? She may be a little uptight with her jokes, but she’s a beauty, and she’s got her cute moments, too. Now that you’re a sworn friend of the spirit folk, how about you take a spirit folk bride with you?” Dominic brought up with a blinding smile.

“Umm, that’s a bit...” Rio struggled to respond.

“D-Don’t say such absurd things!” Alma blushed furiously and objected, causing Rio to force a smile on his face.

“That’s right. You need to consider how the person feels... Especially when it comes to women,” Rio said, making Dominic look at Alma in surprise.

“Why? Don’t you like Rio, Alma?”

“N-No, it’s not that I dislike Rio or anything. It’s just that I’m still young, so there are other things I’d like to do first...” Strangely, Alma replied to Dominic quite seriously, her face red.

“Alma ish so cuuuute. Then... I’ll be Rio’sh bride, too!” Orphia said, petting Alma’s head.

“Ohoho. You can’t lose to them, Latifa. You too, Sara.”

“Yup!”

“W-Why am I included?!”

Latifa nodded innocently, while Sara yelled her protest in a panic.

“Gahaha. Rio, my boy, you should just take all four as your brides. The spirit village allows polygamy, after all,” a red-faced Dominic jeered, laughing loudly and boorishly with Soul Sake in one hand.

“It seems like this old man has finally reached the status of a full-blown drunk...” Alma shot Dominic an exasperated glare.

The others laughed at the sight. Before he realized it, Rio was laughing too. He couldn’t even remember the last time he had laughed this hard... it was a happy moment in time.

While they laughed, chatted boisterously, and watched the entertaining side shows that performed, the majority of the spirit folk in the grounds had passed out drunk. Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and even the alcohol-tolerant Alma had fallen asleep next to Rio. Alma had been tipping back the stronger drinks to hide her embarrassment, resulting in her current predicament.

“Hm. This is quite the spectacle,” Ursula said to Rio with an uneasy smile.

“If that’s what you think, then please make an effort to stop them next time,” Rio replied fluently while his face was flushed red.

“Bwahaha! Were you not having fun, Lord Rio? You could have used spirit arts

to sober them up at any time, but no one would do such uncouth things at festivities like this. Why don't you loosen up a bit more?"

"No, I've had enough fun." Rio shook his head with a slightly strained smile, then looked over at Latifa, who was sleeping happily.

"I'm thinking of telling Latifa soon."

He didn't specify what. Ursula would understand what Rio needed to tell Latifa even without him saying it.

"...I do believe it's still a bit early, but that may actually be for the best," Ursula said, gazing lovingly at the sleeping Latifa.



The day after the Grand Spirit Festival...

Rio woke to the morning rays filtering through his window. None of the other inhabitants of the house were awake yet, so he cooked a thin porridge for everyone — that was easy on the stomach — and ate alone. After leaving behind a note, he went outside, and wandered aimlessly around the village. In the aftermath of the banquet yesterday, there were far fewer people awake and walking outside than usual.

Rio made his way to the deserted village square, then proceeded to lie down on the ground, face-up. He closed his eyes and felt the wind against him, and he remained that way for what may have been several hours.

"Onii-chan?"

An anxious voice sounded from above his head. Rio blinked his eyes open, and Latifa's face looked back down at him.

"How did you know I was here?" Rio asked with a somewhat strained expression.

"I'm a werefox, remember? I have a good sense of smell, and I'd never forget Onii-chan's scent."

"Oh, that was right. So what's up? You don't look too good."

"No, I'm okay. Onii-chan wasn't there when I woke up, so I got really scared

for a moment. I thought maybe Onii-chan had left and gone far away.” Latifa smiled with a look of deep relief, shaking her head.

“...Hey, it’s been over half a year since we came to this village, right? Are you having fun living here?” Rio suddenly asked, a contemplative look on his face.

“Hm? Yup! It’s super fun! Sara and the other girls are here, Vera and the other kids are here, Ursula and the elders are really kind, and most of all — Onii-chan’s here!” Latifa nodded, beaming with a carefree smile. Rio felt a twinge deep within his chest, but he had to keep going. After several seconds of hesitation, he spoke.

“...Latifa. I’m thinking of leaving this village after a while.”

Unsure of how to break the ice, he ended up phrasing it rather bluntly. He watched for her reaction.

At some point, while he had been distracted, all traces of emotion had disappeared from Latifa’s face. She was frozen stiff, looking at Rio’s face blankly, even though she had been smiling so cutely mere seconds ago.

“You’re... leaving?” Latifa managed to ask in a hoarse voice.

“Yeah, I have to leave. You remember how I was originally heading east, right?” Rio answered her truthfully with a serious face, purposefully pushing back his own emotions.

“...No.” Latifa mumbled in a quiet voice, but Rio continued to speak anyway.

“I won’t be able to bring you with me, Latifa—”

“N-No! Never!” Latifa yelled loudly, as though to drown out Rio’s voice.

“Latifa, please, listen to what I have to say.”

“I’m not listening! I don’t wanna!” Latifa fretfully backed away. Her eyes darted about, before she suddenly broke out into a run away from Rio, refusing to listen to him anymore.

“Hey, Latifa?!” Rio called after her fleeing back, but Latifa made no move to stop. Perhaps she had applied the physical enhancement spirit art that she learned from her recent progress in training, because her small and light frame ran like the wind.

Where is she going? Rio wondered, expression darkening.

At the very least, she wasn't heading in the direction of the house. She was running off in a direction away from the center of the village. Rio's movements had been numbed by his guilt towards Latifa — even if he chased after her now, it was obvious any conversation they'd have would only turn sour.

Standing still and clenching his fist, Rio hesitated, wondering if he should chase after her anyway.



Latifa panted harshly as she continued to run aimlessly.

“Hah... hah...”

Her surroundings were changing at a dizzying speed, but she didn't stop running. Right now, she just wanted as much distance from Rio as possible.

No, no, no, no!

Her heart was entirely focused on getting away from him. In her mind, as long as she didn't have to listen to him, he wouldn't leave.

This presented a contradiction: even though she didn't want him to leave, *she* was trying to leave *him*. Thankfully, there weren't many people walking around the village because of the banquet, which had run late into last night. In this way, she wouldn't run into anyone who would question her behavior and try to stop her.

Before she knew it, Latifa was outside of the village. She had no idea how much time had passed; it may have been a minute, ten minutes, or even an hour.

With all other presences completely gone from her surroundings, Latifa finally came to a stop.

A tranquil silence had fallen over the forest, with no sounds other than the chirps of birds and cries of small animals. The village was surrounded by several layers of strong barriers; while it had its weaknesses, it was generally protected from outsiders under most circumstances. Even if there was a trespasser, the warriors of the village would come running immediately.

Furthermore, there were no roads in the forest, making it very easy to get lost — though Latifa could make her way back to village using her sense of smell at any time. There was no need for her to fear getting lost or running into dangerous creatures.

And yet, at that moment...

Latifa noticed that the skies above her were rather noisy, and looked up. Through the gaps of the trees, she saw several of the village's warriors flying through the air, conversing in rather loud voices. It was Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

They could be searching for her — realizing that, Latifa looked around in a panic, but sighed in relief when she noted that she was still alone.

With that, she ran off once more, putting further distance between her and the village.



While Rio was speaking to Latifa in the village square, far above the skies near the great forest, a single griffin was soaring through the air.

“Mr. Reiss, did we pass through a forest this large on our way here?” The boy, who was carefully carrying the large egg, asked Reiss in a worried voice. Reiss was manning the reins of the griffin.

“Did we, I wonder?” Reiss answered indifferently. His gaze was fixed sharply on the great forest below them, so he was barely paying any mind to the boy.

Statistically speaking, most of the force field should cover the ground below. However, the closer the distance to village, the more the barrier would protect the sky, too. I would love to carry this out in a smart way, but I only have three pawns to use, and who knows when that will come for its egg. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I suppose — I shall have to speed things along, even if it's a bit more risky. Reiss looked coldly between the boy, the egg in his arms, and the griffin between his legs. With a small chuckle, he adopted a gentle tone as he addressed the boy. “Shall we take a water break? I’d like to let the griffin rest a little, too.”

“Y-Yes, sir. But will it really be all right? Resting in a place like this.”

“Well, it does seem like a peaceful forest. This is a rare opportunity... Why don’t you make some memories instead of being afraid? You may never lay your eyes on nature like this again.”

After that, Reiss lowered the griffin down next to a suitable spring. At the moment, they were located within half a temporal hour away from the village, if traveling by air.

The boy led the griffin to the spring by the reins. After he tied it to a nearby tree, the griffin began to drink the spring water. Then, the boy moved to refill his canteen with water, too.

“Now, I’m going to take a little look around this area. I shall be back soon, so swallow this and wait here for me.” Reiss handed the boy a small stone. The stone was transparent, like a jewel.

“Swallow... this?” The boy, understandably, expressed some resistance. Very few people would willingly swallow jewels for fun, after all.

“It’s a type of artifact. A precaution prepared in the unlikely event that I am separated from you. As time passes, it will slowly dissolve inside of you. The absorption itself will pose no harm to you. But, if you don’t want to eat it, I won’t force you...”

“I-I’ll take it, if that’s all it is!” Taking Reiss’ words for what they were, the boy hurriedly accepted the jewel and swallowed it with some water.

“Good — now I can leave without worrying.”

“You’ll be back soon, right?”

“Indeed. If anything happens, feel free to leave me behind and get away on the griffin. You should run in that direction, by the way,” Reiss said, pointing where the giant tree was hidden from perception by magic barriers.

“Okay!”

“Oh, and one more thing. Do carry the egg with you carefully. In the unlikely event that you need to run, of course.”

“I understand.” At Reiss’ emphasis, the boy nodded with a huge, exaggerated smile.

“Now, if you’d excuse me.”

With that, Reiss slowly wandered off into the forest. Less than a minute later, the boy’s figure by the spring was completely out of sight.

“I’d love to take the remaining eggs back right now, but I must wait for *that* to arrive in search of the decoy egg first. The demi-humans could also appear at any moment, so I must make haste.”

Reiss gave a small sigh. Immediately after, his body started to float in the air. He rose high into the sky before flying away, placing distance between himself and the village.



Meanwhile, Latifa was still running through the forest. A four-meter long bird — Orphia’s contracted spirit, Ariel — had been flying above the forest near the village. Orphia and Uzuma were also patrolling the skies, along with several other warriors from the village.

“Another intruder, huh? That makes two in the past six months. These aren’t very peaceful times,” Alma murmured from where she sat on Ariel’s back. Sitting next to her, was Sara.

“It’d be fine if they just left like this,” she said. “And if they’re human, we can just ask what their motive is. Uzuma, make sure you don’t make the same mistake as that time with Rio.”

“I-I know that!” Sara’s stern warning made Uzuma nod in guilt from where she flew nearby.

Their urgent flight continued for another quarter of a temporal hour (roughly 30 minutes). Sara’s group arrived in the vicinity where the greatest ode reaction was observed; all they had left to do was investigate the area and locate the target.

“Orphia, are there any suspicious ode reactions nearby?” Sara asked.

“...Two near the spring over there.” Orphia replied a few seconds later.

“There’s a human! And that’s... a griffin!” Uzuma spotted the target instantly with her sharp vision.

“...Let’s descend into the forest first. Then, as we discussed earlier, we’ll listen to what they have to say, peacefully. If the human tries to make a run on the griffin, we’ll restrain them.”

At Sara’s orders, the party moved down into the forest and towards the spring.



The boy paced in circles around the spring.

“He said he’d be back soon... Damn it!”

Thirty minutes had passed since Reiss left to explore the area. Yet there was still no sign of his return. Just then, the bushes nearby started to rustle.

“Mr. Reiss?!”

The boy’s expression brightened as he turned towards the sound. But the moment he spotted who had appeared from the bushes, the color immediately drained from his face.

“D-Demi-humans...” The boy murmured in shock at the sight of Sara’s group. Sara’s group seemed to be able to hear his words, as their expressions furrowed in the slightest.

“We would like to talk to you. Will you come with us quietly without putting up a fight?”

“Eh? Ah, umm... haha.”

The boy moved his left hand to his waist in a panic, pasting a fake smile on his face as he cautiously backed away towards the griffin. He shot a glance towards where the egg was.

“...What kind of egg is that?” Sara asked in suspicion and looked at the egg.

“Oh, umm, I wonder...” The boy picked up the egg in his right hand as he gauged their faces for their reactions.

“Please refrain from making sudden moves. We do not wish to do this the hard way, but we do have appropriate countermeasures prepared if we sense any hostility from your actions. Will you answer our questions?” Sara asked

sincerely as she attempted to negotiate a compromise.

In actuality, humans very rarely passed through this forest. Because of this, the village warriors — including Sara — did not have much experience with situations like this. There was no protocol for this situation.

When Rio had intruded half a year ago, their wariness had caused them to act rashly, making them lose their calm and causing Uzuma to go into a frenzy. That was why they had reflected on that experience and chosen to take the calm approach this time. However —

“S-Sorry!”

The boy tucked the egg into his side and pulled out a knife hidden at his waist, moving to cut the rope that tied the griffin to the tree. Then, he jumped onto the griffin’s back.

“H-Hold it right there!” Sara yelled in a panic.

But the boy ignored her order and directed the griffin to take off into the air.

“We have no other choice! Sara, give the order to attack!” Uzuma yelled as she activated the spirit art she held ready in her hand. The other warriors immediately prepared themselves to go on the offense.

“Kuh! Aim for the griffin! Make sure you don’t kill the human boy!” Sara commanded, and several of the warriors launched less harmful spirit art attacks into the air.

But griffins weren’t called the rulers of the skies for nothing: with their high intelligence, they could detect the low power attacks directed at them and calmly make maneuvers in the air to avoid them.

“Kaaaaah!” The griffin let out a high-pitched screech and flapped its wings as it suddenly sped up.

“I-It’s fast! Get after it -- that’s the direction of the village!” Sara yelled, taken aback. The warriors of the village all kicked off the ground and flew into the air.

“Sara, get on Ariel!”

At some point, Orphia had materialized her own contract spirit. Alma had already hopped on its back, so Sara hurried to join her.

“Yes, let’s go!” Sara’s group immediately took to the skies, flying high above.



“Ugh, why can they fly?! Damn monsters!” The boy yelled, seeing the warriors of the village chasing him.

He had taken to the skies on the one-off chance they wouldn’t be able to fly after him, but he hadn’t expected the pursuers to be able to give chase in the air. If anything, this made the situation even worse than before.

“Hey, fly faster! You’ll be killed, you know!” he shouted wildly, ordering the griffin to accelerate using the method that Reiss has taught him.

Because of his desperate orders to accelerate — or maybe because of the stress caused by the attacks it had just received — the griffin huffed in agitation as it sped up. However, it still wasn’t enough to pull away from the village warriors behind him. If anything, they were closing the distance between them, little by little. Realizing that it was only a matter of time before he was caught, the boy’s panic increased.

Just then, a black shadow covered the boy’s vision. A large mass descended upon him at a rapid speed, coming to a stop just before him.

“Huh...?” The boy let out a dumbfounded noise. He didn’t understand what had just happened.

“Kaaah?!”

Meanwhile, the griffin noticed that something had obstructed its path and dropped its speed immediately. As a result, they barely avoided colliding with it.

However, the sudden movement had sent the boy flying, along with the egg that had been tucked into his side. The boy’s face twisted with fear as he instinctively curled around the egg. Once he had secured the egg within his grip, the boy fell through the tree leaves and branches at a high speed.

He felt the branches snap against his body, the powerful collisions causing pain all over. In the middle of his descent, he let go of the egg he had been carefully carrying, and landed on the ground, back-first.

“Gah!” A groan of pain escaped the boy’s mouth at the same time the egg

made contact with the ground.

A huge crack ran along the shell, and the contents started to leak out. At that moment —

“W-What?!”

Latifa’s timid figure appeared; she had been running around the forest aimlessly when a boy had fallen near her.

“A-Are you okay?”

Once she had spotted the fallen boy, she ran towards him in a hurry.

“Huh? A human...?” Latifa froze at the boy’s human appearance. But, despite his species, she couldn’t cast aside someone so battered and injured.

“Are you all right?” she asked, and cast the healing spirit arts she had just learned the other day.

“Ugh...” the boy groaned, and weakly opened his eyes.

He found himself face to face with Latifa, who had twitching fox ears growing out of her head. His face twisted with fear.

“Eek! Stay away, monster!” he yelled, turning pale.

“Wh-Wha... Kya!” Latifa flinched and backed away, trembling.

After the boy pushed her away, he fled in a panic, face screwed up in pain. Only Latifa and the cracked egg were left behind — or so she thought, when...

“Kyaa?!”

Suddenly, a large black mass dropped from the sky, snapping the branches of the trees as it fell. The force of its impact easily blew Latifa away.

“Ugh... Eek?!” Latifa opened her eyes from where she laid.

Before her eyes was a dragon-like creature, with its front legs and wings constructed as one limb, its whole body covered in black scales, and with a height of 20 meters. It stared down coldly at Latifa.

This was a Black Wyvern — a member of the superior wyvern subspecies, and it sat at the top of all other demi-dragons. Its combat abilities were believed to

be greater than all but pureblood dragons themselves. Even amongst demi-dragons, they were of a completely different caliber than the Winged Lizards that Latifa and Rio had encountered in the Wilderness.

“D-Dragon...”

To Latifa, who had never seen a real dragon before, the Black Wyvern’s form had a presence that was just as overwhelming as a true dragon.

“Grrrooar!”

Latifa had been trying to get to her feet when the Black Wyvern’s roar made her cower. She let out a squeak and fell back down onto the ground. As she began to slowly back away, the Black Wyvern shot her a glance that said she wasn’t worth its time, before looking around at its surroundings.

Then, once it spotted the cracked egg —

“GRAAAAAH!”

It let out an even greater roar at the heavens, and its enraged and menacing eyes locked onto Latifa. The Black Wyvern twisted its body with a snap; Latifa thought that it was turning itself around, but a whip-like tail swung out horizontally, and the sound of air being sliced through rang throughout the air. The trees, which grew everywhere in their surroundings, were all mowed down at once.

Latifa’s scream fell on deaf ears as it was drowned out by the thunderous crash made by all of the trees that were sent flying.



The village warriors came to a screeching halt at the grave situation that had suddenly befallen them. Right after the enraged Black Wyvern suddenly descended upon the boy on the griffin, another Black Wyvern appeared — and it was leading several other wyverns.

“Lady Sara, it’s a flight of the flying dragon subspecies!” Uzuma immediately identified the intruders as she confronted them, as the wyvern herd menacingly flapped their wings from a distance.

“Nobody panic! They wouldn’t come this far out for nothing. They won’t

attack immediately and it doesn't seem like they're here to hunt... Oh no, don't tell me...!" Sara trailed off, remembering the egg the boy had been carrying moments ago.

"Sara, it's the egg! What if that boy just now stole that egg?" Alma and Sara came to the same conclusion.

"If so, this is bad. Both he and the egg are in the forest..." Sara bit down hard on her lip, furrowing her brow.

One of the Black Wyverns had descended to where the boy had landed in search of the egg. If the egg was safe, it was likely that the wyverns would avoid a confrontation and simply return to where they came from. However, if it wasn't... the worst-case scenario flashed through Sara's head, making a chill run down her spine.

After some time, the Black Wyvern below them let out a roar towards the skies, as the herd of flying dragons above beat their wings in a show of furious grief.

"It doesn't seem like that's an option anymore. This is very bad. The village is right there..." Alma's face scrunched up.

The Black Wyvern on the ground swung its tail and razed all of the trees in the area. In response, the flying dragons in the air attacked Sara and the others.

"Orphia, Alma! We're going to take care of those two Black Wyverns! Uzuma, you lead the other warriors and eliminate the remaining wyverns!"

"Understood!"

The other members of their party moved out as soon as Sara gave the order. As they faced the approaching wyvern herd, each warrior released their most powerful specialty spirit arts. However, as many of the spirit users present were of a flying type, most of those present specialized in wind abilities.

Spirit arts could manipulate natural phenomena, but the laws of nature could only be influenced, not completely dominated. Depending on the strength of the arts user, one could ignore the laws of nature to bring about unnatural phenomenon. When the village warriors used their spirit arts, the surrounding winds blew violently, attacking the flying dragon with blasts of air launched

from blades of wind and ode.

However, even if they managed a direct hit against the wyvern's skin, they had no effect other than a mild physical attack. At most, it slowed them by a fraction. There was not much else it could do against the large frames of what were, easily, ten-meter-tall examples of a typical subspecies. Wind elemental spirit arts had a wider and more adaptable range of use compared to other elements, but it also had a lot less power. Especially in a case where the opponents had such large bodies, in most circumstances, a spirit art of great scale had to be used to not be outmatched.

"Tch, we can't use high power spirit arts while we're flying! Spread out! Form pairs so that one can act as bait as the other maximizes their physical enhancement and aims for where their armoring is weakest!" Uzuma ordered, causing the warriors to scatter.

Meanwhile, Sara's group had drawn the attention of one of the Black Wyverns.

"I can see why they call it the closest subspecies to the pure dragons. I've heard that true dragons have special skin that completely repels ode... These flying dragons seem to possess a similar effect," Alma said with a bitter smile. The girls had already fired spirit arts at the Black Wyverns to confirm their suspicions, noting that they weren't able to deal much damage.

"Isn't there a more effective method, Alma?!" Sara asked, turning to look at Alma as she rode on Ariel's back.

"It's a simplistic strategy, but we can only attack it with spirit arts that bring about more physical effects. Rather than using ode to materialize energy and give it a physical form, doing it this way would lessen the difference in power by quite a bit. I'll take the one on the ground... Can you two handle the one in the air?"

"We have no choice... Understood. We're leaving the ground unit to you, Alma!"

"Sara, please lend me Hel. We'll fight in coordination with my Ifritah."

"Got it. Hel, help Alma out!" Sara said, materializing a silver wolf in midair

that turned to head towards the ground.

“Thank you very much. May the fortunes of war bless you!” Alma said, jumping off of Ariel’s back and summoning “Ifritah,” a spirit with a form similar to that of a lion. She hopped on its back and fell downward.

Once the four-meter-long lion and wolf had both landed safely, they ran towards the Black Wyvern as it prowled on the ground.



Immediately after the Black Wyvern had obliterated the trees with its tail, Latifa was blown away by the force of the wind. She was blasted up ten meters into the air, but she managed to catch herself, thanks to her light frame. In a worst-case scenario, she would have hit the trunk of a tree back-first.

“Uugh...”

Despite her ordeal, she somehow managed to stand, and broke into a run to get away.

“Graaaaah!”

“Eek?!”

The Black Wyvern roared, making Latifa’s body tremble with a jolt. She glanced over her shoulder just in time to see the beast open its impressive mouth and inhale deeply. Air flowed into its lungs, expanding its torso a bit. Then, fireworks burst from its mouth as the Black Wyvern exhaled it all in one go. A line of searing heat extended outward, burning down trees and attempting to fully envelop Latifa’s body whole.

But, just as it was about to make a direct hit —

“Latifa?!” Alma weaved through the gaps and appeared, slamming the mace in her hand against the ground with a powerful amount of force. The ground rose up high, forming a thick wall to protect the two of them.

“A-Alma!” Latifa hugged Alma, overcome with emotion.

“H-Hey! We’re in the middle of a battle right now. Why are you all the way here?! Wait, let go of me first. It’s not over yet — it’s coming! Get on Hel’s back, quickly!”

“O-Okay!”

Latifa hurriedly climbed onto the back of Sara’s contract spirit. Meanwhile, Alma got onto the back of her own contract spirit Ifritah once again. As soon as the two had securely climbed on, the wolf and lion spirits both leaped high into the air, just as the dirt wall Alma created crumbled into pieces.

The Black Wyvern’s tail emerged from the rubble, and Hel’s wolf form leaped into the air and spat out an icy breath at the beast. Immediately after, Ifritah’s lion form struck similarly with a breath of fire.

A combined ice and fire attack — once the Black Wyvern’s body had been exposed to such dramatic temperature changes, Alma leapt from Ifritah’s back, down towards the wyvern. She enhanced her physical body with spirit arts, and swung her mace. The Black Wyvern roared, whipping its tail towards Alma as she leaped at it. Alma’s mace and the Black Wyvern’s tail collided with each other with a shrill sound.

“Kuh, that isn’t enough to finish it?!” Alma frowned, using the recoil from the impact to leap backwards. After landing on the ground, she looked at the Black Wyvern’s tail to check for damage, but it was still completely unharmed.

“A-Alma, let’s run away! You can’t win against it... it’s impossible!” Latifa yelled from Hel’s back.

“No! If I run away, the village would be — kya!”

The Black Wyvern wasn’t about to wait for Latifa and Alma to finish their conversation; the jet black demi-dragon waved its tail in a fit of rage, aiming its attack on Alma in particular. Alma leapt in the air and evaded the attack, but there was no opportunity for her to launch a counterattack.

“Alma?! Hel, Ifritah, go help Alma out! I will too!” Latifa ordered.

At that, both Hel and Ifritah broke out into a run. Latifa jumped off of Hel and dashed hurriedly towards Alma.

Honestly, she was scared — but seeing Alma under assault made her unable to stay on the sidelines any longer.

“L-Latifa! You mustn’t come this way!”

“I-It’s okay, I can fight too! H-Hey, you! Over here!” Latifa approached the Black Wyvern and provoked it, making it switch its attack target to her. In that time, Ifritah picked Alma up on her back and temporarily retreated to the safety zone. Hel backed Latifa up as she faced the Black Wyvern, helping redirect some of its attention. From what Alma could see, Latifa was using her light movements to evade the fierce attacks of the Black Wyvern. But she couldn’t keep that up forever. “Kuh... Ifritah! You help Latifa and Hel distract the enemy. I will use that time to prepare a large-scale spirit art!” Alma ordered after a moment’s hesitation.

Defeating the Black Wyvern would require a considerably high-powered spirit art, but there was nothing that she could activate on the spot. She needed all the help she could get, so she was grateful for their efforts in distraction.

“Latifa, buy me a little time, but without endangering yourself! Retreat once I give the signal!”

“O-Okay! ...Kya?!”

Just as Alma gave her instructions, the Black Wyvern changed its attack pattern. It had only used its tail to attack up until now, but this time, it suddenly leapt forward. The irregular action made Latifa freeze up for only a moment, but that moment was all it needed.

Latifa would be crushed under its weight.

Just as Alma thought that, a seven to eight meter-wide ball of ice came shooting from behind her, colliding head-on with the Black Wyvern’s body, heavily knocking back the jet black demi-dragon. Immediately after, a gust of wind blew past Alma, closing in straight for Latifa.

“Huh...?” Latifa let out a slightly dumbfounded noise.

She thought her body had gotten lighter for a second... But before she realized it, she was being snugly held in the arms of her most precious person — Rio.

“Sorry I’m late, Latifa,” Rio apologized with a slightly darkened look on his face.

“It’s... okay. I’m... sorry... too. For... running away...” Latifa blinked blankly for

a moment, before that expression gave way to a steady stream of tears as she apologized to Rio.



“We’ll talk later. Everything’s all right now — you can step back,” Rio said, smiling as he patted her head and lowered her to the ground.

He had been in the middle of his walk when he hurried to intervene, so he was without his weapon. But Rio showed no hesitation as he glared coldly up at the Black Wyvern, which towered far above his head.

Soon after that, he was off. Jumping high into the air at a tremendous speed, he kicked the chin of the Black Wyvern from directly below it.

“Grah?!” The Black Wyvern’s large frame bent backwards, and a sound of pain uttered from its mouth.

Without pausing for a breath, Rio gracefully twisted his body and aimed a slashing kick with the outer edge of his foot at the opponent’s neck. The jet black demi-dragon staggered, taking a stumbling step to one side.

“Its skin is so rigid... Guess it wouldn’t be that easy,” Rio said, frowning slightly in midair. He had kicked it with the intention of incapacitating it, but the attack hadn’t done much damage to the Black Wyvern.

“Graaaah!” the Black Wyvern raged, aiming a breath of fire at its opponent.

However, Rio stuck his left hand out and fired a blast of wind, deflecting the incoming fire breath. The flames that just left the Black Wyvern’s mouth went rushing back in.

“Gyreeh?!” The jet black demi-dragon screeched in pain — it seemed as though fire directed inside its mouth was its weakness.

Rio smirked and launched an enormous ball of fire into the Black Wyvern’s mouth. At the same time, he used wind spirit arts to float smoothly in the air and move above the opponent’s head. He put both hands together, and swung them down with all his might. With a loud thunk, the Black Wyvern’s mouth was slammed shut, and a large explosion took place inside immediately after.

An incredible amount of heat and shockwave energy was produced inside its mouth, and the Black Wyvern shook its head furiously as it bent backwards.

A dark blood was beginning to brim in its enraged eyes; it staggered for a while, before collapsing heavily to the ground.

“A-Amazing. You defeated it so easily...” Alma muttered in amazement, having watched Rio easily take care of the beast all by himself, without any need for assistance.

“It seemed like the inside of its mouth was its weakness. Thank goodness that was easy to figure out,” Rio said with a bitter smile, and landed softly on the ground beside her.

“No, even if that were the case...” Alma replied in astonishment.

The opponent was over 20 meters in size; it was no small feat to get close enough to the face to fire inside it. One could have easily been crushed by its jaws and eaten.

“Onii-chan!” With a sidelong glance at Alma’s dumbfounded state, Latifa jumped at Rio.

“Oh, it looks like they’re done up there too.” Receiving the force of Latifa’s embrace with his whole body, Rio looked up at the sky with a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Alma looked up too. There, the warriors were yelling triumphantly at the scattered flight of wyvern subspecies that were trying to flee. The other Black Wyvern was still alive, but it was running away, along with a significantly lower number of its kin than when it first attacked.

Then, Orphia and Sara (the latter still on Ariel’s back), came down from above.

“Alma, you’re amazing! How did you defeat it? ...Oh? Rio and Latifa are here too?” Orphia started speaking in excitement as she looked at the Black Wyvern on the ground, before she noticed Rio and Latifa with widened eyes.

“Rio defeated that Black Wyvern all by himself,” Alma confessed with a forced smile.

“Eh, by himself?! That’s amazing! I’m not surprised — it’s Rio, after all!” Orphia praised with a radiant smile.

“No, it was nothing. Hey, was anyone injured on your side?” Rio diverted the topic with a shy smile.

“We’re all fine. It may have been more dangerous if the battle had dragged

out, but thankfully, the others all ran away,” Sara explained after landing.

“Sara, why do you think the wyverns in the air ran away?” Alma asked.

“Probably because that Black Wyvern there was defeated. While we couldn’t defeat the remaining one, this was all thanks to Rio. Thank you very much.”

Sara answered, bowing her head at Rio.

“It was nothing... I am Latifa’s brother, and everyone’s sworn friend, after all.”

Shaking his head bashfully, Rio gave a small shrug of his shoulders.



“Hah... Hah... Hah...”

The boy was running through the forest, panting for breath. Both the griffin and his travel supplies were gone, and all he had left were the clothes on his back and the weapon in his hand.

He was all alone in this great forest, with no idea of where to go or what to do.

“Why the rush?”

A person appeared out of view and asked the boy in a calm voice. The boy looked around his surroundings in a panic, but couldn’t find the owner of the voice.

“I’m over here,” The voice said from above. The boy whipped his head up and saw Reiss floating in midair.

“A-Aaah... M-Mr. Reiss?!”

“So you actually managed to survive that situation... To be honest, I’m surprised,” Reiss said, sounding impressed as he landed on the ground.

“W-What do you mean ‘actually’?! Were you watching the whole time?!” the boy yelled in anger, not caring about how Reiss was flying in the air, nor the politeness of his own words.

“Heh heh. Contrary to expectations, your true personality was so repulsive, I was inadvertently captivated. They say a person’s true colors are revealed when their life is in danger... and it seems they were right.”

At those words, the boy's self control snapped completely.

"E-Enough of your bullshit! I nearly died! You're the one who brought me to this shitty place... So, apologize! How will you compensate for this?! I won't forgive you!"

"Heh. Heheheh. You're an interesting person, so this is a shame. Are you sure you want those to be your final words?" Reiss asked with an arrogant smile. He held a small, clear, jewel-like stone between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

"H-Hah? Is there something wrong with your head? Give me that jewe-" the boy ranted, and Reiss crushed the jewel between his fingers. An expression of agony suddenly came across the boy's face, and he fell to his knees.

"Goodbye."

With those words, Reiss took to the skies once more.

Chapter 8: Bonds

The next day, Latifa led Rio to the square where they had parted ways the day before.

“U-Umm... I’m sorry for running away yesterday!” The first thing out of Latifa’s mouth after they turned to each other was an apology.

“...I should be the one apologizing, Latifa. I was the one at fault. I should have told you in a better way... I was too clumsy about it. I’m sorry.” Rio was slightly taken aback, but after a beat, he awkwardly apologized.

“T-That’s not right! It was just me being spoiled! I-I actually knew all along, kind of... I knew Onii-chan would leave the village some day... That’s why I was scared. Not having Onii-chan there for even a moment makes me so worried.” Latifa rejected Rio’s words and revealed her own thoughts, as if to appeal to him.

“B... But you know, yesterday, when I heard you say you were leaving, I went a little crazy. I made Onii-chan worry, and caused trouble for the other girls... So I thought about it. I thought about it all night. I wanted to talk to Onii-chan once I gathered my thoughts...”

Watching Latifa get more and more anxious as she spoke made Rio’s expression darken slightly.

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to you, too,” Rio nodded, making Latifa sigh in relief.

“Thank goodness...” she said as the strength drained from Latifa’s body.

“I should be saying that. I was worried you hated me now.” Rio shook his head with a tense smile.

“N-Never! I love Onii-chan! I was worried you’d hate *me* after everything. Worried that you’d leave the village because I’m always causing trouble. I knew that wasn’t the case, but... The thought of being a bother to Onii-chan made me so scared,” Latifa said, tears flowing in large drops.

“You’re not a bother,” Rio informed her.

“Huh?” Latifa looked up at him blankly.

“You don’t cause trouble, and you’re not a bother. I’m not sure whether its okay or not for such a selfish person like me to be your brother, but you’re my sister. No... I’d be honored if you would accept me as your brother. Truly,” Rio said falteringly, looking somewhat guilty.

“...I’m your little sister though, Onii-chan. I want to be your little sister! Onii-chan isn’t selfish at all! Is it okay? Is it really okay for me to be your sister?!” Latifa’s body shook, tears falling as she spoke.

“You’re okay with me as your brother?” Rio asked somewhat hesitatingly, but Latifa nodded emphatically and hugged him.

“Yup! Onii-chan is my brother! The one who saved me. The one who’s kind to me! The one who saved me, even when Onii-chan could have just killed me!”

“No, I... I told you, right? That I simply didn’t want to kill anyone. In order to avoid getting my hands dirty, I showed you false kindness. I’m not kind at all, really. I’m just selfish,” Rio said regretfully, furrowing his brow. His hands did not move to wrap around Latifa, and fidgeted aimlessly instead.

“It’s real! It’s real kindness. I was a slave before, so I’m really sensitive to people’s malicious intentions. I’ve lived my life grovelling at the feet of others, observing their moods and always apologizing, so that horrible things wouldn’t be done to me... But I couldn’t feel any malice in Onii-chan at all. That’s why Onii-chan’s kindness is real!” Latifa tried to desperately appeal to him as she clung to him.

“Latifa...”

“Anyway, I’m selfish too! You know... Even when I didn’t have a reason to live, I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to be in pain, so I did everything they told me to. With this very mouth, I said my master was the best. I was the most precious thing to myself. No... That’s still true now. Even though Onii-chan’s so important to me, I keep making demands and causing trouble!”

“No, I wasn’t inconvenienced at all. You’re not selfish — it makes me really happy to hear you ask for things,” Rio said bluntly, shaking his head at her self-

deprecation.

“...E-Ehe. Ehehe. Thank you... I’m happy, too.” Latifa looked taken aback for a second, before smiling shyly from the depths of her heart. That made Rio finally smile, too, and he awkwardly stroked Latifa’s back.

“...Hey, Onii-chan. Will you really... be my brother?” Latifa asked once more, timidly, as she peered up at Rio’s face.

“Yeah. If you’re OK with that.”

“Yup, I’m fine! I want Onii-chan!”

“Really? Thank you,” Rio said with a conflicted expression that was partway between happy and worried.

“Yup. Ehehe.” Latifa nodded with a grin. She continued to cling to Rio for a while; he was simply letting her do as she wished. Then, after some time — “Hey, Latifa. Do you want me to stay in the village?” Rio asked, grabbing Latifa by the shoulders and gazing into her eyes.

“U-Umm... if-if Onii-chan wants to leave the village, I... I can handle it. Because I know we’ll meet again. That’s why... I won’t even be spoiled and ask to go, too. I’ll do my best,” She replied, giving a more mature smile than usual.

“...The reason I’m heading to Yagumo... I don’t think I’ve told you yet, Latifa. It’s the hometown of my dead parents. That’s why I want to go to the Yagumo region. It’s like visiting a grave... sort of.”

Before he knew it, Rio was laying himself bare so easily that it surprised even him. This was a part of himself that he had never considered confiding to anyone, at least of his own free will —

“So that... was why... I... I guess I didn’t know anything about Onii-chan. Yet, I still...” Latifa muttered in embarrassment, seemingly shocked.

“The same goes for me, too. There’s so much I don’t know about you, either.”

“...I guess... that’s true. I haven’t told Onii-chan lots of things. Things I need to say properly... Things I want the Onii-chan I love to know about me. Is that all right?” Latifa’s face took on a serious expression, and Rio gently nodded his head.

“...Yeah. Will you tell me your story, Latifa?”

Rio knew he had to hear it, because right now, Latifa was trying to take a big step forward. If he rejected her here, her progress would come to a halt.

“Then, I’m going to tell Onii-chan my secret. It might be hard to believe, though...” Latifa emphasized as a preface. “The truth is, I actually died once. I used to be a human. Then, I was reborn into who I currently am. Erm... I don’t know how to say it so Onii-chan will believe me, but it wasn’t in this world. I lived in a country called Japan. But before I knew it, I was in this world...” She explained earnestly, albeit in a disorderly fashion.

“I see. I believe you,” Rio easily accepted. Latifa turned a searching gaze toward him.

“...Really? Onii-chan believes me?”

“...Sorry. Rather than saying I believe you... it’s more like I already knew. Because... I’m the same as you.” Rio corrected, regretfully shaking his head.

“Huh? ...Huh? What does that mean?”

“You were a Japanese person. I was one too.”

“...Y-You, too?” Latifa was so shaken, she barely managed to put her question into words.

“I was Japanese, too,” Rio answered seriously, using clumsily-spoken Japanese.

He had maintained his use of the language until now by thinking in Japanese whenever he was alone, leaving him still somewhat fluent despite being without a conversation partner for all these years.

“Japanese... Ja... pan... Onii-chan was Japanese, too?” Latifa asked unsteadily in Japanese as well.

“That’s right,” Rio nodded strongly.

“So, Onii-chan... knew about me... and didn’t say anything...?” Latifa asked blankly. She had reached a point beyond being surprised, and the emotion had completely fallen off of her face. She had gone back to using the language that was familiar to this world.

“Yeah,” Rio replied honestly, hanging his head a little as he looked straight into Latifa’s eyes.

By giving an affirmation with his words, the memories he had sealed deep within his heart of when he was a Japanese person vividly came to life. He clenched his hand into a fist, those memories making him feel ashamed.

“Onii-chan...” Latifa seemed to sense something within Rio’s gesture, and meekly fell silent.

“Sorry. I should have opened up to you sooner.”

“...No, that’s okay. But when... did you notice?” Latifa asked timidly.

“When I first made pasta for you. You called it spaghetti,” Rio replied with a strained smile.

“That was so long ago... But... I see... that makes sense.”

“Back then, you were still a bit... mentally unstable. So I didn’t think it was something I needed to tell you. But, really, I just didn’t *want* to tell you, because I didn’t want to develop any weird regrets for my life in Japan...” Rio said with a self-deprecating smile.

“...I see. I was being protected by Onii-chan this whole time.”

“No, I was only prioritizing myself,” Rio said through gritted teeth, but Latifa shook her head.

“Nope. Does Onii-chan still have regrets from when you were in Japan?”

“If I said I had none... that would be a lie. I definitely had regrets when I died. Do you have any, Latifa?”

“I did, but... I’m fine, now. Because I have Onii-chan.” Latifa answered, beaming with everything she had. Rio’s eyes widened.

“You sure are strong...”

“That’s because I have you. Because Onii-chan is here, I can be strong. That’s why... umm. I know its demanding of me to ask, but I want to know more about Onii-chan. That way I won’t be as lonely in this village while you’re gone. So... if it’s possible, I’d like to hear stories about your life before you were reborn. Is

that... okay?"

"...Yeah, okay. If it's to you, I can say it. You're my little sister, after all, and I'd like to hear more about you, too. Let's talk things out, slowly. We still have plenty of time." Rio hesitated for a bit, but eventually agreed with a soft smile.

"Okay! Wait, you're not leaving right away? There's still time?" Latifa said, nodding with a smile at first, before being taken aback.

"Yeah. There's still a lot I want to learn from the village, and I still want to stay with you for a while... So it'll be another year, at least."

"E-Eeeeh? I... thought you'd be leaving right away..." Knowing that their farewell was still far in the future, all the strength drained from her.

And then, on that day, the two exchanged stories of before they were reborn. Although Rio held back from elaborating upon his experience, they still talked about many things.

The biggest shock was the fact they were distantly acquainted with each other, and rode the same bus just before they died. When she discovered that truth, Latifa began to blush a little. And before they even realized it, they had been talking to each other until evening.

From that day onward, the two of them became siblings in the true sense of the word.

Then, once they got home —

"Oh, my. You two are looking even closer than before... I take it went well?" Ursula asked. She had been waiting in front of the house.

"Yes, thank you for the concern. We've become closer," Rio reported a bit shyly.

"Even if Onii-chan decides to leave, I've decided to wait for him in the village!" Latifa said with a carefree smile, as a teardrop suddenly rolled down Ursula's cheek.

"Oho... I see I have become more susceptible to tears in my old age... Lord Rio, thank you for saving this child." Ursula grasped his hand, as though in prayer.



One year went by in a flash. On one particular day, when Rio's departure from the village for the Yagumo region was growing imminent, he was summoned by the village elders, and went to the council room of the town hall.

"Hm. Good of you to come." Syldora, Dominic, and Ursula stood at the front, welcoming Rio with a smile.

"Erm... Did you need something from me today?" Rio asked with faint wariness at the rather exaggerated welcome. Syldora was the one that broached the subject.

"Well, there is something we wished to give to Lord Rio, being that you are our village's benefactor and sworn friend. First, please accept this as a gift from the village."

With that said, Syldora presented Rio with a bracelet. It was made from a mythrill metal called magic silver and had a complex formula carved into it, along with a huge spirit stone that was embedded within.

"Is... this a Time-Space Cache? I cannot accept something so valuable." Rio's eyes widened, refusing the gift almost reflexively.

Rio was quite familiar with the Time-Space Cache. Loaded with time-space magic that humans couldn't reproduce through sorcery, it was a magic artifact that held a rather extraordinary effect. It created a semi-perpetual isolated dimension in proportion to the registered owner's essence, from which items could be freely stored and retrieved at will.

"Think nothing of it. It is merely another symbol of our friendship. Your journey should be a lot easier with this, no?" Syldora shook his head, and pushed the Time-Space Cache at Rio.

"It may be easier, but..." Rio said, expressing his hesitance in accepting the gift. Then, from the side —

"Don't sweat the details, kid. That's what a sworn friendship is all about. And the gifts aren't just from the village, ya know? The dwarves have prepared a weapon set to present you. This sword here is made from mythrill. It can absorb your spirit arts and encapsulate itself in them. There's also an armor set made

from the leather of the Black Wyvern you defeated. Honestly, it makes metal armor look like paper in comparison,” Dominic said in a good-natured voice, with several dwarves carrying weapons and armor following him.

The valuable sword was embedded with a spirit stone that glittered beautifully. The armor set was designed like clothing, with gloves, boots, and a long coat that were all made of the Black Wyvern’s leather. It glimmered with a jet black sheen.

“Since you still have room to grow, we made the size a bit on the larger side. We’ll make further adjustments once you return to the village. And, just so you know, it was custom made for you, so you have no right to refuse it,” Dominic said with a smug look.

“The dwarves are not the only ones who prepared a present — we elves have prepared a large number of medicines, too. There’s an inventory list of everything included, which you may inspect later,” Syldora said, handing Rio a single piece of paper and gesturing towards a large wooden box on the ground beside him that must have been filled with the medicines.

Many elvish medicines were crafted using precious materials and created with spirit arts, and their effectiveness was leagues beyond what human medicines could do. The list he was handed even included secret potions and miracle elixirs, making Rio’s eyes widen.

“Is it really alright for me to take such potions and elixirs from you?”

“Hahaha, do not worry. I was the one who gave instruction on how to make all of those recipes. As long as you have the materials, I could teach you how to make them too, Lord Rio.”

“Aren’t those materials highly valuable?” They were all items that were difficult for humans to cultivate; some items even required Dryas’ tree sap.

“They may be difficult to obtain in human territories, but that is not the case for this village. Feel free to take as much as you like,” Syldora said with a gentle smile.

“Now, there’s still the werebeast’s share to account for. We’ve prepared ingredients harvested in the village — so much of it, in fact, you’ll never run out.

Because of the large amount of ingredients, we couldn't bring it here to this spot, but you can store it in your Time-Space Cache later. Oh, and this one is from not only the werebeasts... Every other species put forth their specialty alcohol too."

Finally, as though to deliver the finishing blow, Ursula presented a mountain of food and drink.

"Everyone... You prepared so much..." Rio clenched his fist as his face twisted apologetically.

"That's a silly thing to say, kid. You're underestimating just how much you've done for us until now. It'd be ungrateful of us to let you leave from this village with nothing in hand!" Dominic said with a laugh.

"Indeed, it is exactly as Dominic says. You may consider it the collective will of the village."

"That's right. So, please — we want you to accept it." Both Syldora and Ursula spoke in a voice full of determination.

Behind the three head elders, the other village elders deeply nodded. Rio slowly raised his head and looked around at the faces in the room.

"Words of gratitude are not enough for the greatest kindness you have bestowed upon my unworthy self. If ever a danger shall befall upon the spirit folk, I vow to assist you as your sworn friend — with my entire being." Rio spoke his verbal pledge, and gave a profound bow of his head.



Finally, the day came for Rio to depart the spirit folk village.

There were so many people who wanted to see him off, they had to borrow Dryas' shrine as a gathering point before his departure.

"Everyone, thank you very much for this past year and a half," Rio said, offering his gratitude to everyone who came to see him off.

"Have a nice trip, Onii-chan!" Saddened by the farewell, Latifa hugged Rio until his appearance became a little ruffled — but Rio found that all the more endearing.

“Latifa, Rio is in pain,” Sara said in fond exasperation with a smile on her lips.

“Since we won’t be seeing each other again for a while, I’m charging up on as much Onii-chan energy as I can! This is your chance if you want to hug Onii-chan, too, Sara!” Latifa said from where she clung to Rio.

“W-What?! I don’t want to hug him at all!” Sara denied with a furious blush.

“Then I’ll hug him instead of Sara.”

“...Me too. Please.”

Orphia and Alma said, having just appeared.

“Huh?” Sara said dumbfoundedly.

“Good for you, Sara! Orphia and Alma will do it in your place. Okay, I’ll let go for a moment, then!” Latifa said with a triumphant grin, letting go of Rio so that Orphia and Alma could approach.

“Uugh...” Sara’s expression twitched.

“Ehehe, it’s a little embarrassing. Then... do excuse me. Have a good trip, Rio. Let’s all live together again when you get back!” Orphia said her parting words with a bright smile as she gave Rio a gentle hug.

“Thank you. I’ll search for delicious recipes while I’m on my journey,” Rio replied, smiling bashfully. Then, after Orphia had let go of him with a slightly regretful look, Alma stepped forward.

“Rio. P-Please make sure to take care of yourself. I’ll be praying for you to have a safe journey.” Alma embraced Rio with a blush, too.

Rio had grown a fair bit in height during his stay in the village, so compared to the smaller size of a dwarf like Alma, it was like the size difference of an adult and a child.

“If I find any delicious sake on my trip, I’ll bring it back as a souvenir. We can drink it together.”

“Ah... S-Sure. If it’s not too much trouble, then please do.”

While she thought it was a bit odd for a young maiden to be offered alcohol as a souvenir, it still made her happy, which made Alma’s blush grow even

deeper.

“Come on, Sara, you too!”

“Wah! H-Hey, Latifa!”

Once Alma let go of Rio, Latifa shoved Sara from behind. Losing her balance and tripping over her feet, she found herself in front of him.

“Ah, umm. Hi, Rio...” Sara stood before Rio shyly with scarlet-colored cheeks.

“Hi, Sara. How can I help you?” Rio replied with an amused laugh.

“P-Please train me again when you get back!” Sara said in a rather hasty way, before moving promptly and wrapping her arms gently around him.

“Sure. Keep up your own training so you can win one over me next time.”

“Ugh... okay. I won’t lose!” With a small groan, Sara clenched her two fists in motivation. Then, Uzuma, Anya, Vera, and Arslan, as well as crowds of other spirit folk, all came forwards at once.

“Everyone all at once?” Rio looked around at them with widened eyes.

“Sara’s group is special!” explained Vera.

“Yup, yup. Sara’s group is special, right?” Anya looked over at the girls with a knowing grin. Orphia received her gaze with a smile of her own, but Sara and Alma avoided making eye contact.

“Rio, I hope you have a good trip. Let’s play together again when you come back.” Vera hugged Rio cutely.

“Oh, my. Did you win over Sara’s little sister too? I shouldn’t even be surprised anymore.”

“What are you saying, Anya?” Rio’s smile twitched doubtfully.

“Rio! Stay healthy! Train me too when you get back!”

“Yeah, sure. You take care of yourself, too, Arslan. Please be good friends with Latifa.”

“T-That goes without saying, of course.” Arslan blushed and turned away a bit brusquely.

“Lord Rio, I am also looking forward to the day you can fight me again. I shall endeavor to discipline myself even more than you, to become stronger,” Uzuma said next.

“Yes, I’ll be training myself too. I look forward to our rematch.” With that promise, Rio and Uzuma exchanged a firm handshake.

To Uzuma, while it was only a practice match, Rio was one of the few opponents she could go all out against. The same went for Rio. Ever since he taught Uzuma techniques for sparring with other people, her skills had risen exponentially. They both anxiously awaited their rematch.

“Then, I shall be praying for your good fortune. Take care.”

“Yes, do look forward to your souvenir.”

With a deep nod, Uzuma left Rio’s side. Then, the elders appeared.

“Oho. We shall keep this short and sweet for you; the elders will say their farewells all together. Lord Rio, come back to us at any time. This village is your home too,” Ursula said with a cheery smile.

“That’s right! Come back whenever you want!” Dominic said with a merry laugh, grasping Rio’s arm firmly.

“Yes. All of us present will be awaiting your return, Lord Rio. May the spirits guide your journey.” Syldora smiled and offered a prayer for Rio’s safe travels.

“Thank you all very much. I hope everyone here takes care as well,” Rio said, nodding at all the elders.

“Have a good trip and see you again soon, Onii-chan!” Latifa came over once more to give her final greeting, hugging Rio enthusiastically.

“Yeah, I’ll be back soon.” Rio gently hugged Latifa back. Eventually, he reluctantly let go of her hand and turned on his heel with resolve...

...Only to turn back around to face the spirit folk villagers.



“Everyone! It is my greatest honor to be a part of you. I am deeply indebted to you all for including my undeserving self amongst your ranks as a sworn friend,” Rio said in a loud voice, before manipulating wind with spirit arts and floating gently into the air. The villagers were cheering at him and waving their hands.

“I look forward to the day we meet again!”

With that said, Rio waved his hand and rose far up into the sky. Then, his figure disappeared, heading quickly toward the sky’s horizon. The spirit folk waved their arms until they could no longer see Rio’s form.

“There he goes,” Alma muttered quietly once Rio’s form disappeared completely.

“Sara, Orphia, Alma. I won’t lose,” Latifa said, her eyes fixed on the sky where Rio had disappeared.

“...Huh? Lose at what?” Sara replied in confusion.

“I love Onii-chan. As family, and as the opposite sex. There might be someone other than us in Onii-chan’s heart... But I won’t give up. So, just in case you all love him too, I’m going to declare war right now. Though, it doesn’t really matter if none of you care about Onii-chan in that way anyway...” Latifa stared at Sara and the others with a daring smile.

“W-Wha — I never said I didn’t care!” Sara said vaguely with a bright red face, her words neither confirming nor denying anything.

“Fufu, that’s not very honest of you, Sara,” Orphia said with a sweet smile.

“That’s right. Being dishonest because of your embarrassment is one of your faults, Sara.” Alma slumped her shoulders in exasperation.

“A-Aren’t you the same as me, Alma?! You’re not one to talk!” Sara objected.

“At least I’m honest when it counts the most!” Alma said nonchalantly and turned her face away. Sara knew this was the kind of behavior Alma took on when she was embarrassed, thanks to the many years they’d spent together.

“See! Just like that! We’re the same in how we get embarrassed!”

“That’s not what I was talking about.”

The way their conversation heated up like this was typical for Sara and Alma. If Rio had been present, he would have watched on with a grin at such a familiar scene. The villagers present watched, all smiles, as the girls noisily argued.

It was the year 998 of the Holy Era — more than seven years had passed since Rio regained his memories of his previous life. The day when history would be set into motion was fast approaching.

Epilogue

One day, in the Yagumo region, in the Kingdom of Karasuki...

On top of a small hill outside of a certain village stood two small stone pillars.

A distinctive man knelt before the pillars. Behind him, a serene-looking woman did the same.

The man's outfit was not flashy, but he was wearing clothes similar to a refined samurai's outfit, with a rustic single-edged straight sword sheathed at his waist. The woman was wearing elegant and proper clothes with a fine pattern. Both were aged between their prime years and middle-aged, but they still appeared youthful.

"Sure brings back memories. Makes me think of the days when you said you wanted to see Zen's hometown, so we escorted you out and snuck you over to this village..." The man mumbled toward the pillars with a sorrowful smile carved into his mouth. He seemed to be talking to himself, as the woman behind him showed no reaction; she only stayed kneeling with her eyes closed.

"...Lady Ayame, the view from this hill hasn't changed much since those days." The man's muttered, lamenting words were almost drowned out by the gentle wind stirring the grass on the ground.

Afterword

Hello, everyone — I am much indebted to you all.

I'm Yuri Kitayama.

Thank you very much for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles* Vol. 2.

I believe you have probably picked up Volume 2 after reading Volume 1, which I consider a great blessing as an author.

Now that Volume 2 of *Seirei Gensouki* has been released, there is something that I wish to inform everyone of here. The continuing publication of the light novel *Seirei Gensouki* has been decided.

That's right — we're a series now! Volume 3 will be released!

It was only a month ago, where I had been feeling both excited and nervous for several days following the release of Volume 1. However, not long after that, Editor N told me: "It's selling really well. We may need an emergency second print." I was so relieved to hear that, and at the same time, I felt great happiness to be able to continue writing the light novel version.

This is wholly thanks to all the readers that purchased Volume 1.

I also received many messages of support on the internet, and the first handwritten fan letter of my life, which was a great source of motivation! Many thanks to everyone, from the bottom of my heart! As for the release of Volume 2, a great number of concerned parties were involved... sometimes involving support from places that I could not see. To those people, I would like to take this space to extend my deepest gratitude. Thank you very much!

Back to the book, now: the highlight of this volume is definitely the adorable character illustrations drawn by Riv.

The fan favorite, Latifa, the three girls from the village, as well as the other girls... and Liselotte, who was hugely popular in the web novel... All the characters were drawn in wonderful detail. Of course, it's not only the

characters, but Riv's scenery illustrations are also wonderful! Especially the cover illustration, which has been drawn in meticulous detail. It is truly drawn beautifully.

For the purpose of drawing the characters, I sent Riv materials for character references. There were some that were overly detailed, while others were just vaguely noted, so I'm sure it must have been a lot of trouble for Riv. It probably made the illustration process a lot more cumbersome, too.

However, Riv always delivered quality that was above my imagination. I have bowed so much that I can't even raise my head anymore. (sweat) *Xiexie!* And so, without further ado, I'd like to introduce my favorite illustration other than the cover art... And that is the color image on the inside cover of the book.

All the heroines featured in volume 2 are gathered there, but the shot where Latifa and Suzune are touching hands gave me goosebumps. For readers of the light novel version: after you've read the main story and once you've understood the circumstances of the two girls, please go back and look at the illustration once more. You may feel something that's different from your first impression of it.

Now, there isn't much space left on this paper, and there are still thanks to give that I haven't said yet.

There's Editor N, who gave an extraordinary amount of effort for the release of this volume.

I speak with N frequently through texts and phone calls, but my house is actually pretty close to the Hobby Japan headquarters, so we've also met in person a few times. It's there that we discuss the details of the story. After those meetings, N will always treat me to a meal. I'm honestly so humbled. At our most recent meeting, I was treated to an exquisitely delicious steak.

Furthermore, regardless of my work, we rant about our favorite light novels, manga, anime, and favorite game heroines. (laughs) If I have an opportunity to in the future, I may write about our meetings more in this space.

Look forward to it, won't you?

Well then, everyone — that's all for this time. Hopefully we'll meet again in

Volume 3!

Yuri Kitayama

November 2015

Bonus Short Stories

Girls with Animal Ears Enjoy Being Petted!

One day, after a year or so had passed since Rio and Latifa began living in the village...

“It’s a celebration!”

“It’s time to celebrate!”

Sara and Alma were drinking tea in the living room, when all of a sudden, Latifa came in with Vera in tow and closed in on them.

“W-Wah! What’s the matter, Latifa? Vera?”

“Latifa told me all about it, Sara! She said that Rio acknowledged you during training this morning. That’s why we have to celebrate!” Vera said.

“Y-You don’t have make such a big deal out of it...” Sara shook her head with a strained smile at her little sister’s insistence.

“Fufufu. There’s no need to try play it cool!”

“That’s right! I know my sister’s actually really happy about it deep down!”

Both Latifa and Vera said with triumphant expressions.

“Indeed, Sara’s been in a good mood ever since morning practice ended. She’s even been grinning for no particular reason,” Alma murmured from where she sat, opposite Sara.

“I-I have not! I am not grinning!” Sara objected in a fluster, a red blush on her cheeks.

“Geez. Sara just isn’t honest with herself!”

“I completely agree.”

“Guh...”

Sara flushed even deeper at Vera and Latifa pointing out the truth.

“And so, we’ve decided to fulfill any one of my sister’s wishes. Name your price!” Vera cleared her throat and proudly puffed out her chest.

“I-I don’t need anything in particular, really.”

“Don’t say that! What would you like?” Latifa asked.

“I... That’s not something I can just answer on the spot...”

“Huh? Really? I can think of many things I’d want...” Latifa mumbled under her breath.

“Like what?”

“Like having Onii-chan feed me his cooking, or having Onii-chan lend me his lap to lie on under the sun, or having Onii-chan pet me...” Latifa counted off her on her fingers as she listed them off, one by one.

“T-They all have something to do with Rio!” Sara yelled, taken aback.

“Fufufu! But... I’m sure you’d want him to do that to you, too. I bet you pictured it in your head, right?” Latifa said with a smug grin.

“Ugh... O-Only a little, though! It may have flash across my mind just a little...” Sara responded truthfully, but her embarrassment made her duck her head.

It was then that Orphia returned from her errands outside. “I’m home! ...Huh? What’s wrong, Sara?” She took one look at Sara with her gaze fixed downwards and tilted her head in question.

“Welcome home, Orphia.”

“My sister has something she wants Rio to do to her!”

Latifa and Vera answered in one synchronized breath.

“Oh, really now? Sara?” Orphia asked, examining Sara closely.

“I-I do not! These two were just asking me if there was anything I wanted them to do for me. It’s not like I want Rio to hand-feed me, or let me use his lap as a pillow, or pet me or anythi—...?!”

Sara was desperately refuting everyone when her eyes landed on Rio, who

was standing behind Orphia. She froze mid-sentence, as though time had stopped.

“Umm... I’m home, Sara,” Rio greeted awkwardly as Sara’s face scorched with embarrassment.

“Whoa... Sara, your face is bright red,” Orphia said with a wry smile.

Sara stood up on her trembling legs and marched over to the corner of the room. She squatted down and buried her head in her hands.

“Uugh...” she let out a muffled groan. Her ears and tail flicked about this way and that.

“I’ve never seen Sara behave this way before,” Alma said, her eyes widening.

“Right? What should we do?” Orphia asked with a troubled look.

“We should just get Rio to pet her!” Vera offered her brilliant suggestion. “The best way to get rid of a gloomy mood is to be petted.”

Rio’s eyes widened in shock, while Sara’s body shook with a flinch.

“W-What are you saying, Vera?!” Sara stood up resolutely, objecting to Vera’s pleased words in a fluster.

“Oh? Do you not want Rio to pet you then, sister?”

“Uh... I... Something that childish is...” Gazing into Vera’s pure and innocent eyes put Sara at a loss for words.

“I guess I’ll ask him to pet me instead.” Orphia stood up, electing herself.

“O-Orphia, that’s not fair. Then, I shall too.”

“I want to be petted too!”

“Me too, of course!”

Alma shyly announced her intention to join the bidding, followed by Vera and Latifa jumping on the bandwagon. The girls started to playfully approach Rio in jest. Sara was the only one left behind, watching the sight of them playing with a blank look.

After a pause, Sara came to her senses with a gasp. “I-I want to be petted too!

It's my celebration, after all!" she yelled. All of the other girls exchanged expressions of amusement.

"Okay, you first," the girls immediately said in unison, and stepping back from Rio all at once.

"Huh? Ah..." With no more obstructions between herself and Rio, Sara's eyes wandered, hesitantly avoiding eye contact. Latifa circled behind her and gently pushed her back.

"W-Wah, err, umm, ah, Rio..." Once she was standing in front of him, Sara raised her head and looked up at Rio with tearful eyes.

"Erm... Is this all right?" Rio gave a strained smile and petted Sara's head.

"T-Thank you... very... much..." Sara thanked him in embarrassment. Her ears and tail were happily moving about.

We Want Mixed Bathing!

Latifa had come to the village's reservable hot spring with Sara and the other girls.

"Mrrghh..."

They were in the changing room; Latifa was grumbling as she watched the girls change.

"Erm, Latifa? It's embarrassing to have you stare so intently..." Sara said, a faint blush on her cheeks. She tugged her outfit closed around her tightly.

"Is something the matter?" Orphia tilted her head curiously.

"No... I was just wondering if men prefer bigger chests." Latifa's gaze was fixed on Orphia, who had the largest chest of those present.

Orphia was only 13 years old, her physical development having matured along a bit further compared to other elf girls her age, but if anything, her physique was more on the dainty side. She probably didn't have room for that much more growth in the future.

"Ahaha, who knows. I'm an elf, so I probably won't get any bigger than this.

Sara's a werebeast, so I think she has the potential for much more development." Orphia grinned and blushed.

"Wha— you say that, but you're the one with the bigger chest here, Orphia! And I'm a year older!" Sara responded in a flurry.

"...You're both being insensitive. Latifa, too. No matter how much you worry, you'll never be smaller than me." As a dwarf, Alma pouted her lips just a little.

"L-Latifa's only 11 years old right now. You shouldn't be thinking about these things until you're a little older. It's still too early for you," Sara chided Latifa, having noted Alma's scornful look.

"Hrmph..." Latifa grumbled uneasily.

Having the person in her thoughts always by her side made it a perfectly justified concern to have.

"Come on, take off your clothes so we can get into the bath now."

"Okay!"

At Sara's urging, Latifa stripped her clothes off and proceeded towards the bathtub.

"Phew, this is what happiness is..." After washing her body, Latifa sank into the bath water and let out a sigh. She sat in the bathtub with her knees hugged to chest and face, looking forward and letting her gaze wander without focus.

I hope Onii-chan will pay lots of attention to me in the time we have before he leaves the village...

Her thoughts were all about Rio.

Recently, she had taken to listing the things she wanted Rio to do for her and the things she wanted to do for Rio inside her head every day.

"Ehehe." As she imagined various things, Latifa smiled happily.

"What is it, Latifa? Now you seem rather happy about something," Sara asked with a somewhat pleased expression.

"I was just thinking about how much more fun it would be to have Onii-chan bathe with us," Latifa answered unabashedly with a carefree smile.

“W-W-What are you saying?! There’s no way that would be allowed!” Sara flushed red as she yelled.

“Eeeh? But it’d be so much fun if everyone could hang out in the hot springs together at least once... Don’t you think?” said with an unhappy expression.

“True, it does sound fun,” Orphia agreed with her in a gentle tone.

“Not you too, Orphia!”

“Onii-chan uses the same hot springs, so it would’ve been better to just come together. Do you think it’s too late to ask him to join us now?”

“...Now that you mention it, the boys’ bathroom is right next to here,” Alma muttered supportively in response to Latifa as she thought out loud.

“Huh? Really? Then if I called for Onii-chan, he could come right away?”

“H-Hey! What if he actually comes here for real?!”

Latifa raised her voice happily, but Sara stopped her in a fluster. Orphia and Alma laughed in amusement at the two of them.

...I would never, Rio thought to himself from the bathroom next door.



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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 2

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